

# Questions for Azalea Mavens— to Address in *The Azalean*

By Will Ferrell—Winston-Salem, North Carolina

*Editor's Note: Will also sent wonderful color photos with each of his questions, which we were not able to use in this issue. Will has made great suggestions for **The Azalean** articles. If anyone wants to tackle one of his questions, we could include his photo as an illustration. Also, if there are other topics members would like to know about, please send those ideas to [theazalean@gmail.com](mailto:theazalean@gmail.com).*

Within the ASA membership there exists a plethora of dispersed knowledge. I would like therefore to throw out some questions to members. I hope to shed some light on these questions, but also to provoke interesting future articles in *The Azalean* by those with specialized experience.

## Question 1:

This has to do with Satsuki azaleas. This later-blooming, generally low-growing group has many virtues: Their often outstanding foliage, their structure that allows them to be used differently from most other azaleas, their extension of the typical azalea blooming season, and their varied and beautiful blooms all demand our attention. Yet, somehow, they largely escape most in-depth azalea discussions.

Most Satsuki azaleas are not super cold hardy, thriving generally in USDA Zones 7-9. And indeed my few Satsukis here in Zone 7—though they thrive and have beautiful foliage—do not bloom reliably every year. Yet a few cultivars are known to be hardy to -10°F. Is there anyone with broad enough knowledge to do an article for *The Azalean* on which Satsuki cultivars will do well (including bud hardiness) in Zones 6 and 7? Perhaps bringing out other interesting details concerning the large group as well?

## Question 2:

How cold-hardy are the flower buds of azaleas such as 'George Lindley Taber', 'Koromo-shikibu', 'White Koromo-shikibu' (which is less bud-hardy than the lavender), 'Appleblossom', or 'Sekidera'? These azaleas that can work in the middle Zone 7 range, but don't always? These plants will live just fine, but will they bloom reliably where the winter low temperatures are below 5°F? I can tell you it is pretty frustrating to go to the trouble of rooting a 'Venus Baby' and nursing it along for 6 years with a cumulative total of half dozen blooms—and then ultimately condemning it to my compost pile.

Information of this sort would be especially useful to attendees of conventions in Southern cities, where they will tend to offer in the plant sales plants that do well for them. Conversely, in Charleston a gardener tells me that Glenn Dales tend to struggle. Yet I've heard many Robin Hill azaleas (also bred like Glenn Dales for cold hardiness) do

well in the Deep South. And I can testify that Dodd's 'Amy' (developed in southern Alabama) is bud-hardy to at least 0°F.

Are there members who have detailed knowledge along these lines who could provide this information in some form to *The Azalean*? It certainly would be useful. And particularly with reference to each year's convention offerings.

## Question 3:

What is the experience of members spraying for petal blight?

For decades Bayleton® has been touted as the most effective fungicide to combat petal blight. Alas, that product is no longer readily available to hobbyists. Immunex is readily available, and claims on its label to fight petal blight; I have used it occasionally—with mixed results.

In asking quite a few ASA members about their experience in preparation for this article, I was directed to Bob Stewart as the person who had thought about this issue most systematically. (Bob is a northern Virginian hybridizer of many extraordinarily beautiful azaleas—his 'Special Friendship' is a huge favorite for me.) He recommends mixing Strike® 50 and Eagle® 20EW in the same gallon of water to spray. (Bob also suggests including two drops of dishwashing detergent to improve wetting/retention.) Strike® 50 contains 50% triadimefon, exactly like Bayleton®; Eagle® 20EW contains 19.7% Myclobutanil, which is also the active ingredient in Immunex (but at only 1.55% in Immunex!).

Bob also makes the traditional recommendation of spraying the flower bud just as color is beginning to show.

Is it only beneficial to spray flower buds that are just in that stage of barely showing color? Is it detrimental to spray fully open flowers? Both Bob and I tend to think so, but I have heard the opposite opinion.

As an aside, it is pretty interesting that I do not think I've ever seen any petal blight on Encore® Azaleas or 'August-to-Frost' in the Fall, in spite of the fact that there are surely moisture/temperature conditions in the Fall that are very similar to those in the mid-Spring. One might conjecture that it has to do with the life cycle of the fungus.

## Question 4:

Can someone provide advice or guidelines for pruning mature deciduous azaleas? Left to themselves in a woodland, some deciduous azaleas will often reach for the skies, where their blooms cannot be well enjoyed by humans. If I wish to keep my *R. canescens* blooming at close to my eye level, what is the best way to proceed?

It is recommended for some shrubs (for instance, an American Beautyberry) to periodically remove the oldest

“canes” at the base. Is this a good policy for mature tall growing deciduous azaleas, perhaps especially the canes with lots of lichen (indicating vibrant growth has ceased)? Or is it better to simply cut back individual canes to a branch about a fourth or a third of its total length? I intuit that a combination of those two approaches can make sense.

But situations can vary quite a bit. Is there someone amongst our membership with significant experience pruning mature deciduous azaleas? If so, an article with good guidelines would be useful.

### Question 5:

How can you tell whether a particular cultivar of azalea will hygienically shed spent blooms? I have read the offhanded comment—and it seems to agree with my observations—that flowers with distinct sepals directly at the flower base will drop their spent flowers cleanly in the absence of petal blight. Those azaleas where the flowers are attached without sepals will hang on. Kurume ‘Snow’ is the famous example here.

Very often it seems to be double flower forms that do not have these sepals. The sepals have become part of the flower and thus don’t know how to let go.

(Am I the only one who vigorously shakes his azalea plants to shed somewhat degraded blooms, to thereby leave the bush neater with the remaining pretty blooms?)

### Question 6:

It is well-known that azaleas have shallow root systems. But I believe that mature azaleas do send their roots a bit deeper than elepidote rhododendrons, which seem to have a root structure of a very superficial mat or flat saucer barely below soil level. Said differently, it seems to me that azaleas will more readily grow roots a few inches down into amended clay than rhododendrons, which kind of insist on growing in something close to compost.

Native azaleas in the wild can send out a very rangy root system that makes transplanting a significant challenge. Yet my impression of pot-grown deciduous azaleas is that they have reasonably compact root systems similar to evergreen azaleas.

Can any azalea maven shed more light on any of the questions raised? Please do. Send your articles and photos to [theazalean@gmail.com](mailto:theazalean@gmail.com).

*Will Ferrell joined the ASA in 2001 at the Asheville Convention and gardens near Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He recently rejoined the Vaseyi Chapter, as it is closer to him. He is also the author of The Secrets of Sterling Shearin: The Noblest Cause, ...a story of romance and mystery interwoven with less well-known American Founding Fathers, set in the 1790s.*

## Membership Chairman’s Note

*By Chris Wetmore—Central Carolinas Chapter*

It is no secret these days that many plant societies struggle to retain membership. This is typically due to a small handful of individuals within the chapter doing a majority of the work. If one of these members leaves the chapter things can quickly fall apart.

This month I reached out to Rick Bauer of the Northern Virginia Chapter again for some helpful ideas that will go a long way in building and retaining a healthy chapter.

Rick’s Tips:

- Collaborate with other plant societies. Have joint meetings. Invite each other to your activities.
- Engage folks at your meetings (especially guests). Most are looking for a social outlet as well as knowledge about azaleas.
- Follow up on folks who haven’t renewed their memberships. Sometimes the personal approach is all that is needed.
- Engage with the public through plant sales, advertising, and opening meetings to the public.
- Get a Facebook page. Encourage your members to “Like” it and share it.
- Affiliate with a school or garden (we don’t do this...but I think it is a good idea)
- Give away free plants, either from chapter supplies or have plant exchanges. Most of us have plants which are now self-propagating to the point that we have too many.

## CORRECTION

Editorial Correction, *The Azalean*,  
Winter 2015, p. 77:

In the “Legends and Legacies” article describing the ASA/ARS Convention tour of the Cosby Garden, I regretfully called the hybridizer of the Bowie Mill azaleas “Bud” Claggett when his name should have been spelled “Buck” Claggett. I repeated this error in the index to the issues for 2015 and on the ballot for best article for 2015. I sincerely regret these errors.

Barbara Stump, Editor, *The Azalean*