

Where do our Azaleas Come From?—Part I

By Barry Sperling—Alexandria, Virginia

Magic appears at many Northern VA Chapter events. Hundreds, or even thousands, of potted azaleas pop up, green and bushy, attractive for sale or trade. Sometimes it's at plant exchanges. Sometimes at the annual club auction/sale. Sometimes at public plant sales. Always in amazing numbers. Volunteers rush to set up tables, cover them in plastic and arrange the pots alphabetically, or by hybridizer. Afterward, the many volunteers break down the setting and reload the unsold plants into cars, vans and trailers, which head out to ... where? A magic kingdom where the plants are grown and gently tended until the next event.

No secret: this magic kingdom consists of the yard of Carolyn and Paul Beck. For years, this duo has processed cuttings and up-potted both small and large plants in a continuing cycle, moving from small sticks to nestling in garden beds throughout the DC area. Those gardens provide more cuttings. An endless cycle. [See Photo 1.] I contacted Carolyn and she was happy to detail her process.

Cuttings are obtained during the summer and fall from a wide variety of sources, she said: the Cosby garden in central VA, the club's annual cutting exchange, vacation visits around the country, members' gardens, and Mike White's nursery. Some are even mailed to her by enthusiasts with special collections.

In recent years, the bias has been toward varieties within groups that the club has a special interest in preserving, collectively labeled "Legacy Plants"; for more information, visit: <https://azaleas.org/legacy-project/>

Carolyn has shared the knowledge below many times in talks to the chapter. Working with cuttings, she pinches off the terminal buds, and then strips off the bottom leaves. The lowest inch needs to be wounded if the stem has hardened off. Branched cuttings are preferred for slow growing varieties, such as the Satsuki group. For all cuttings, Dip'N Gro, diluted 1:10, is applied to the bottom inch.

About 24 hours before potting, a horticultural-grade of peat moss is mixed with coarse Perlite 1:1. Those are wet, as they are mixed, to the point of holding their consistency as a handful is squeezed. No moisture should drip from this clump. The mass should break apart when dropped back into the mixing tray. Five cuttings are stuck in a 4" pot, two pots with labels are put into a small plastic bag, a 10" florist's stake is positioned in the center to keep the bag from collapsing, the bag is inflated by breath, and the top is closed with a twist tie.

These pots are kept on 18" x 48" five-shelf rolling racks in the Becks' driveway, covered on three sides and the top with white plastic, allowing access from the fourth side. About 800 plants can be held on each rack. As the weather cools, the plastic is taken off the racks. When freezing weather arrives, the racks are rolled into the garage. On cold days, fluorescent lights are kept on over the racks 24 hours a day. The racks are rolled outside anytime the temperatures



Photo Dave Nanney

▲ Photo 1—Paul and Carolyn Beck with results of excellent propagation.

get into the high 30s, and back into the garage whenever temperatures are anticipated to be below 33°F.

On a humid or a rainy day, the next spring, the twist tie is taken off, and the top is opened a little, allowing the internal humidity to drop to more natural levels. Plants that are doing well are taken out of the bag, though they could be reinserted if they falter. Successfully rooted cuttings are moved into their own 4" pots. Otherwise, the bags are re-inflated, and a little water added. These are given winter protection at the end of the season.

The second spring is the time to verify good growth and roots, taking them out of their 4" pots and up-potting to ¾- or 1-gallon sizes. Holly-tone® is applied at this time, as well as in the March/April period, and in midsummer. The fertilizer is added at less than recommended levels.

- ▶ If a plant isn't growing compactly, it might be pruned in spring and midsummer.
- ▶ Many of the cuttings will be ready for sale the third year!
- ▶ A plant growing well is fitted with a bar coded tag by Paul, and he places the barcode information in the NV-ASA website inventory database.

Throughout this long process, volunteers share in a portion of the work. Some will tend a number of plants themselves. We appreciate that Lars Larson, David and Patsy Meadows, Dan and Joanne Neckel, and Fred Newlan have helped recently with this care! Some members will come by and help out in the long, tedious process of up-potting in the spring, and throughout the growing season.

Further afield, the Cosbys have been growing plants from cuttings for the chapter. Mike White's nursery is raising about 500 azaleas a year from cuttings we provided, to be purchased by NV-ASA for a nominal fee when the plants are two years old and ready to be placed in gallon-size pots.

The hard work goes on and has for many years. This is vital, supporting the activities of the club, such as the newsletter and our end-of-year donations.

Nothing is forever, however. Our club will thrive only as long as members grab the wand and keep the magic flowing, asking "What can I do to help?" Carolyn and Paul will answer, "Well, we have a few cuttings over here ..."

Sources and Acknowledgements

Sperling, Barry. "Where do our babies come from? (Plants, that is...)." March 2019. *The Azalea Clipper*. 49(1): 1-7.

Barry Sperling is the editor of "The Azalea Clipper," the online newsletter of the Northern Virginia Chapter. Barry thanks Carolyn and Paul Beck for their knowledgeable assistance with this article.



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The Beginning of Jasper, Texas, Beautification Projects

By Robert Thau—Jasper, Texas

The city of Jasper, Texas, has embarked upon a beautification project. This project has received state funding and azaleas will be a prominent part of the effort. On Saturday, February 16th the Texas Forest Country Chapter held the first of many plantings planned in the beautification project. The chapter planted 50 evergreen azaleas donated by Nature's Way Gardens, which are cultivars that people have never seen in this area. Fifty varieties of evergreen azaleas were planted at the Beaty Orton house, among other varieties of plants already there and which are maintained by the Jasper Master Gardeners. Future plans include a nature trail with native azaleas.

We had 14 chapter member and family volunteers helping on this project. This included children of our members. The project was coordinated by chapter members Laura Golden and Robert Thau.

The chapter would like to thank the people who have been supportive of this project and the promotion of azaleas, including Denise Kelly-Jasper City Manager, Beverly Holly-Director of the Jasper/Sam Rayburn Chamber of Commerce, the Jasper Master Gardeners, and the Jasper Arboretum.

▼ Texas Forest Country Chapter members and family members at first planting, February 16, 2019.



Photo Robert Thau