

Where Do Our Azaleas Come From?—Part II

Becks' Materials and Methods for Azalea Propagation

By Carolyn Beck—Oak Hill, Virginia

Step 1:

Potting Mix for Rooted Cuttings and Larger Plants

Ingredients:

- ◆ 16 cu-ft Virginia Fines, a medium-fine pine bark available at Merrifield Garden Center in bulk or by the bag
- ◆ 6 cu-ft Superfines (also known as pine fines), a fine pine bark available at Betty's Azalea Ranch in bulk or by the bag
- ◆ 3.8 cu-ft compressed peat moss
- ◆ Note: Preferred peat moss: horticulture grade (e.g. Sunagro horticulture Canadian Peat moss 3.8 cu' compressed, or New Brunswick grower grade peat moss coarse blend sphagnum 225 liters) available from Maryland Plants and Supplies
- ◆ 4 cu-ft coarse Perlite available from Maryland Plants and Supplies
- ◆ 3 of the 60-pound bags coarse sand appropriate for landscaping use.

Mixing and Storing:

- ◆ Spread a large tarp on a flat surface, like a driveway.
- ◆ On one end of the tarp, spread the various potting mix ingredients in layers.
- ◆ Note: You may want to save the bags to use for storing the completed mix.
- ◆ Add some water (less than you ultimately will want).
- ◆ Shovel the mix from one end of the tarp to the other.
- ◆ Add enough water to make the medium moist, but not wet.
- ◆ Shovel the mix back to the original end of the tarp.
- ◆ Note: The mixture should hold its shape when compressed in your hand. No water should drip from the mass.
- ◆ If needed, add more water. The mix should be shoveled again to the other end of the tarp each time water is added.

Place the mix in plastic bags or containers (5-gallon buckets work well). Close the containers to retain moisture.

Step 2:

Growing Cuttings and Rooted Cuttings on Rolling Racks

Cuttings are placed on rolling racks (available from Costco). One rack (18" x 48") with five shelves. Only four shelves are used for the cuttings, as the top is covered with plastic in the initial phase. This configuration will hold a total of 800 cuttings, five per 4" pot. [See Photos 1 & 2]

Rooted cuttings are planted one per 4" pot. Pots are placed in trays of 15. All five shelves of the rolling racks are used, each shelf holding three trays. The rack holds a total of 675 of the one-year old azaleas.



Photo Carolyn Beck



▲ Photo 1—Rolling rooting carts.

◀ Photo 2—Propagation carts out for sun, watering, and air circulation.

Photo Carolyn Beck

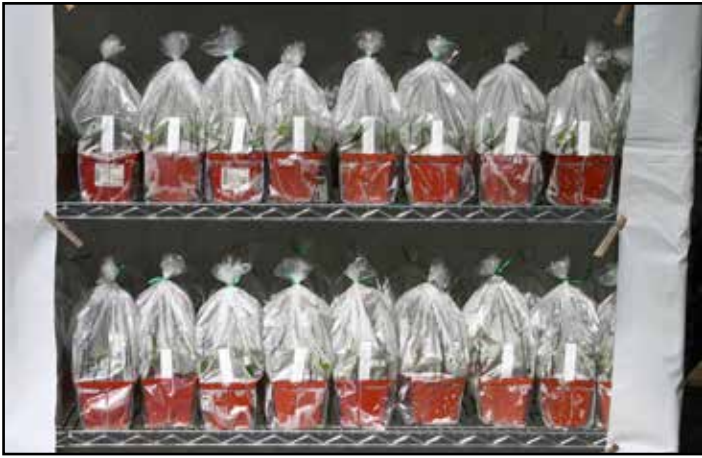


Photo Carolyn Beck

▲ Photo 3— Rooting cart closeup.



Photo Carolyn Beck

▲ Photo 4—Providing natural light for rooting cuttings.

The rolling racks are space savers as because of the vertical positioning of the plants. Our driveway is sunny in the morning and has afternoon shade on the south side. Racks are rolled from one side of the drive depending on the amount of sun and the temperature that day. [See Photo 3]

During the winter, the racks are moved into the garage when temperatures are expected to dip below freezing. If the days are cold for more than one day, fluorescent lights on vertical stands are turned on. These, plus the ceiling lights, are left on 24 hours a day.

Since the sun in summer is more overhead than the slanting of light we have during the winter, during the summer— if there is space in the yard—the trays of rooted cuttings are put on the ground so that they can have more sunlight, particularly in the morning. This location also has the advantage of easier watering, both from sprinkler irrigation and rain.

The trays are moved back to the rolling racks when the weather cools and the sun is again shining from a lower angle.

Step 3: Providing Window Light for Azalea Cuttings

Window light is often a good alternative to growing cuttings on a rack or within a coldframe, especially for those cuttings that are harvested late in the season (late September-October). This location provides more heat than they would get outside.

In fall through early spring, it is safe in our area to place the cuttings near a south-facing window since the sun is not strong enough to cause the amount of heat gain that would damage them. Care should be taken as the weather warms in spring to make certain that the temperature within the bags is not elevated. This can be done by feeling the bags each day, especially when it is sunny. [See Photo 4]

If the temps are still too cold during the night to place them outside, the containers can be moved farther away from the windows until outside conditions improve. The cuttings are placed in a plastic container just in case a leak should develop in one of the bags.

The rooted cuttings are transitioned to the rolling racks when the weather warms in the spring.

Editor’s Acknowledgments

This material was provided by Carolyn Beck in support of Barry Sperling’s article in the March 2019 issue of Northern Virginia Chapter’s *The Azalea Clipper* and in the previous issue of *The Azalean*.¹ It is presented here to show all three important steps in the cutting propagation method. Products mentioned are those locally available to the Becks, but similar products are available in most garden centers.

The method for bar-coding to record the resulting plants for sale by the chapter deserves a separate article by Paul Beck.

References

Sperling, Barry. “Where do our Azaleas Come From?—Part I.” Summer 2019. *The Azalean*. 41(2): 35-36.

Carolyn Beck is a retired Registered Nurse. She is an active member of the Northern Virginia Chapter and is currently in charge of fund-raising. Carolyn and her husband, Paul, are concentrating their efforts on the chapter’s Legacy Hybrids (see NV-ASA.org for more information on their Legacy Project).

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