

Crowd-Sourcing Answers to Azalea Queries

By Various Experts and Members of the Azalea Society

The following azalea questions were submitted to the ASA “Ask Us” online form and were answered by various members of the Society. We are sharing those queries we think will be of most interest to the membership at large. (Submissions were edited for length and clarity.)

Question: What is the proper way to write a botanical name of an azalea? We have several species of *Rhododendron* and many azaleas. Here are some examples. *Rhododendron* ‘Amelia Rose’ *Azalea indica* ‘Splendens’. Some say they are hybrids and others say they are species—*Rhododendron* sp. ‘Pink Carpet’ *Rhododendron* hybrid ‘Gwenda’. We are putting these into a database, and I want to be correct and consistent. I would really appreciate your help. Thank you so much.

~ Mike Brewer, Magnolia Plantation and Gardens in Charleston, SC

Answer: I’m not a systematic botanist (aka taxonomist) but I believe I understand the issues. What follows is my opinion.

It is evident to me that a lot of people don’t know what a “hybrid” is. Hybrids and species are not mutually exclusive terms. In other words, a plant can be both a hybrid and a species. A hybrid is what you get when you apply the pollen from one plant to the stigma of another, different plant (cross pollination); that is, the progeny that result from making a cross produces hybrids between the two parents. For example, the resulting plants from ‘Ben Morrison’ × ‘Martha Hitchcock’ are all hybrids. Similarly, the resulting plants from crossing two different *Rhododendron austrinum* plants are also hybrids. And, the crossing of two different species; e.g., *R. atlanticum* × *R. canescens* also results in the production of hybrids.

Where we get into the weeds is what you have when the pollen is from another flower on the same plant (close pollination)? Presumably, hybrids come from the crossing of two “unrelated” plants, so “close pollination” would not produce hybrids. Galle says that “azaleas are self-sterile to a high degree,” but would self-pollination result in a hybrid? Again, that seems to fail the “unrelated” requirement. Then there is the matter of apomixis. Since that doesn’t involve a cross of any kind, it seems to me that the individuals so derived would not be hybrids.

The usual botanical name for an azalea involves genus, species, cultivar name... where species is known and assuming that someone thought enough of the plant to even create a cultivar name. Since all azaleas come under the genus *Rhododendron*, the genus is obvious. If the species of an azalea is not known (open-pollinated seed) or recorded at some point, it is a disservice to guess. It’s not so much of a problem when the crossing is done with known plants under controlled conditions, but when it is seed collected from the wild (open pollinated), that’s problematic. ‘Balsaminiflorum’ is acknowledged to be a double flower selection of the species *R. indicum* (although I don’t know where that is recorded) so it would be *Rhododendron indicum* ‘Balsaminiflorum’... note the italics on the generic and specific names and the single quotes on the cultivar name. Since you are a professional, you are obliged to be guided by the various codes. One tricky aspect of this process is recognizing what is a cultivar name and what is only a breeder’s working name or a trademark name both of which would not rate single quotes. My prime example of this is with the Encore® Hybrids where all of the pretty names are Autumn something. Autumn Fire® for example is a registered trademark name for the plant whose cultivar name is ‘Roblez’. Most garden centers and box stores either don’t know or don’t care, and they put the pretty Encore® names in single quotes in their signage and literature... which is just wrong.

Azalea indica ‘Splendens’ is another problem. It would be very desirable to sunset the use of the genus *Azalea* since its usage reflects a lack of understanding of current binomial nomenclature. When the genus *Azalea* was subsumed by (moved into) the genus *Rhododendron*, it (the genus *Azalea*) went away. I guess I would show it as *Rhododendron* ‘Splendens’ or *R. ‘Splendens’*. The abbreviation *R.* can be used in text where the genus *Rhododendron* is understood, and it is spelled out in the first occurrence. I’m not an expert on signage, I don’t know what fields you want to maintain in your database, and you are getting into the area of “style.” But, since everything is botanically

a rhododendron, at the very least, you need to distinguish the azaleas from the rhododendrons in your signage and your database. One can't tell (horticulturally) if *R. 'Splendens'* is an azalea or a rhododendron. If you look in the IRRC, you can find where the same cultivar name has sometimes been used many times for both azaleas and rhododendron. To help narrow the field, in the record they show a "broad category": (a) for azalea, (az) for azaleadendron, (r) for rhododendron, and (v) for vireya.

~ William C. Miller III, ASA Editorial Committee

Question: As a European interested in satsuki azaleas and reading everything about them available online, I asked myself the question about what happened to Brookside Garden in Wheaton, MD, USA, and their satsuki azalea trials.

There were several articles in *The Azalean* about the project, getting them all imported from Japan, etc. Seems like a lot of effort by a few people.

Then, there was silence about all of it. And it seems that Brookside Gardens is still in existence and open to visits from the public.

So someone in the area should just go visit there and see if they can find the satsuki and if the plant labels are still there.

~ Mark

Answer: In 1981, several hundred plants of a couple hundred cultivars were lined out in a glade at McCrillis Gardens [in Bethesda, MD], also part of Montgomery Parks system and under the oversight of Brookside Gardens) to see if they were hardy.

All, but maybe two cultivars, were!

Cuttings were given to Gordon Severe and I think Hass Nursery in Oregon, maybe others. Cultivar descriptions made it into Galle's first azalea book with

Brookside Gardens' collection numbers.

Then the trial plot at McCrillis began to overgrow and the site was needed for a wedding lawn.

Mature plants of selected cultivars were planted in the main gardens at both Brookside and McCrillis, and many more were given to the nearby U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, DC, and a local prep school famous for its azalea gardens [the Landon School in Bethesda, MD]. The back portion of the test plot closer to the shelter at McCrillis remained in place to grow into a mass.

Many of the transplanted ones did not thrive long-term. I learned I was siting them in too much shade. The ones not moved are still present for the most part I suspect. There are metal tags way down deep in each plant.

The intention was never to retain them all, just get them into the country, documented, and distributed. So, a finite project. I don't know how the nursery material fared.

~ Phil Normandy, recently retired Plant Collections Manager at Brookside Gardens

Question: I live in Rockville, MD. Do you have any advice on how to help my azalea bush? I think it has bark scale. (See picture on page 78.) The bush is located in the front of my house and gets morning sun. Only the branches closest to the siding have damage. I'm not sure of the age of the bush, since it was here when I moved in.

I'm not sure if I should cut the dead branches. If so, can I use a hedge trimmer to cut them? Or would spraying horticultural oil be better? Everything I read says to spray in mid-July, but we are now in mid-August.

~ Anonymous



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Answer: Looks like azalea bark scale to me. I have never had bark scale, so I don't speak from experience. While horticultural oil seems to be the popular remedy, one website suggested insecticidal soap during the growing season as another approach.

However, in both cases, I still think high temps are problematic. It looks like most of the dead tissue is closest to your white house. Consider the possibility that the azalea was suffering from extreme heat due to being so close to your white house. Your azalea was subjected to major additional heat due to reflection and proximity. I too have a white house and several of my azaleas close to my house showed major chlorosis.

Always read the label. At this juncture, if you still feel like you need to do something, you probably will have to settle for a systemic insecticide like Imidacloprid. Again, read the label to ensure that the insecticide that you select is labeled for azalea bark scale. If you select something like Imidacloprid, you need to perform the application well after the azalea has finished blooming to minimize the damage to the good insects.

In the meantime, I would hit the webbing with a strong spray of water from your hose. Remove all dead branches. I would not use a hedge trimmer, but rather, pruning shears. I'm pretty sure most folks recommend against applying horticultural oil during hot days which pretty much rules out a summer application.

~ William C. Miller III, ASA Editorial Committee

I've dealt with scale many times. Late summer is prime time for scale. It is a very long process getting rid of it, but you can be successful. The scale is actually hard to see with the human eye. Those white sacks (eventually they will hatch) could be squeezed now and a red substance should ooze out. This is what you want to destroy. Bill is correct in applying an insecticide. The best results I've had is using a combination of Volck oil and Malathion. Once applied, the white sacks will dry up and the living scale will die. Read the labels of the products you purchase before applying and repeat as needed.

~ John Migas, Michigan nurseryman and president of the Lake Michigan Chapter, ASA

Always read the label directions. Oils vaporize and dry within about four hours. You do not want to spray when the immediate ambient temperatures are in the 90s with high humidity. As a professional we use oil sprays in the greenhouse all the time. We just come in at 4:00 AM to spray!

The systemic, Imidacloprid is not legal for homeowner use in Maryland and in this case is probably overkill.

I strongly suggest renovation pruning to open up the interior of the plant and stop using hedge shears. Hedging azaleas makes the centers very congested and makes them more vulnerable to pests and diseases.

~ Carol Allen, Licensed Pesticide Applicator in the state of Maryland and an ISA-Certified Arborist

Question: I did not know that you should avoid using horticultural oil on azaleas in the summer. Can you expand on this a bit? We have a sunny, warm spell coming up with highs in the high 70s and low 80s; is that too warm to spray? We sprayed about two weeks ago and may have to spray again.

~ Frederick Thurber, South Dartmouth, MA

Answer: There are many pesticides and other products that should not be sprayed during very hot weather. To do so would cause phytotoxicity and or leaf drop depending on the species sprayed, the concentration, etc. It is usually the adjuvant that is the issue.

~ Carol Allen, Licensed Pesticide Applicator in the state of Maryland and an ISA-Certified Arborist

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