



AZALEAS: Undiscovered Color for Northern Gardens

by Douglas J. Chapman, horticulturist-administrator, The Dow Gardens, Midland, MI.

Deciduous rhododendrons, or azaleas, are the backbone of early spring color in the South. Their vibrant reds, scarlets, and oranges make spring gardens worth a second and third look.

Unfortunately, azaleas are not used nearly enough north of Central Ohio. Some of the most colorful azaleas are perfectly hardy to 25 degrees below zero.

Northern landscape managers can have color in a landscape from mid-April to mid-June by taking

advantage of hardy azaleas, including Korean, Royal, Pinkshell, Exbury (Knap Hill), and Kaempfer.

The hardy azaleas

Korean rhododendron (*Rhododendron mucronulatum*) is extremely useful in naturalized settings as an understory plant or in partial sun. This deciduous rhododendron reaches four- to eight-feet in height. It is the first rhododendron in the North Cen-

tral U.S. to flower during spring (mid-April). This selection has numerous clear pink delicate flowers and an upright oval growth habit. The one cultivar readily available is 'Cornell Pink'.

Korean rhododendron is relatively maintenance-free, although it can have problems with root rot, twig blight, and leaf scorch in full sun.

Pinkshell azalea's foliage [above], turns from lime-green to red in the fall.

Royal Azalea (*R. schlippenbachii*) is a shrubby azalea, reaching three- to six-feet in height with a rounded habit of growth. It is extremely cold-hardy and seems to thrive under slightly shady to full sun conditions. It flowers are rose-pink or magenta.

Pinkshell Azalea (*R. vaseyi*) flowers early in mid-May. This upright, somewhat irregular, shrub reaches five- to nine-feet in height. The flowers range from a clear to dull pink. The foliage is lime-green throughout the summer months while developing good red fall color. This azalea grows well near ponds or bodies of water but needs well-drained, high organic soils.

Exbury and Knap Hill Azaleas are becoming more available in the trade. They flourish in medium shade to full sun. They have a somewhat upright-oval habit, reaching six- to eight-feet in height.

Although botanically the same

type of cross as Exbury, Knap Hill is usually pink and white while Exbury ranges from a brilliant red and orange to bright yellow and cream color.

Korean Azalea (*R. poukhanense*) is another late flowering, small azalea. It is perfectly hardy with an upright-irregular habit, reaching five- to six-feet in

These hardy azaleas can tolerate more sun than our native catawbiense rhododendrons.

height and width.

It thrives under mid- to full sun conditions with magenta flowers in late May. The foliage is dark green during summer, becoming orange to red during the fall.

Kaempfer Azalea (*R. kaempferi*) blooms during early

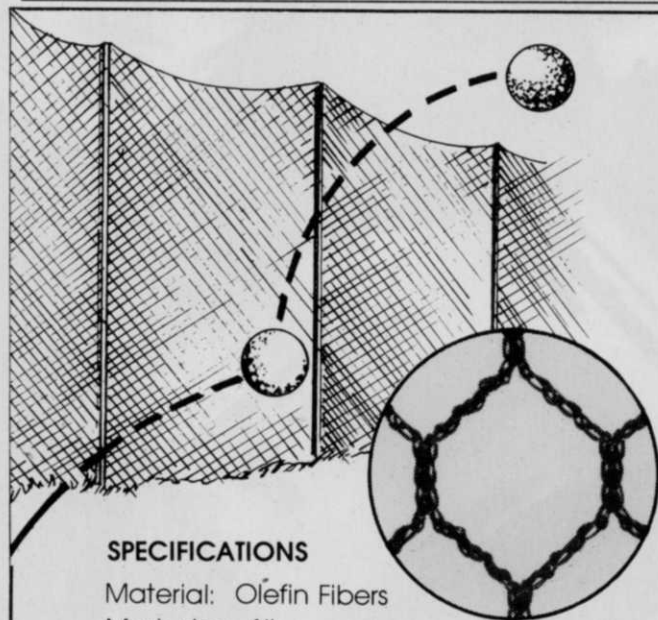
June. This somewhat upright-irregular-shaped shrub reaches five- to seven-feet in height. It thrives in sunny to partially shady locations. The orange-salmon to red flowers are vibrant when most azaleas have finished blooming.

Generally speaking, these azaleas are low-temperature hardy, tolerate more sun than our native catawbiense, or rhododendron cultivars, have more vibrant colors, and require little or no maintenance.

They can be grown as a specimen or in mass plantings at the fringe or border for a woodsy or naturalized look. They thrive when planted in well-drained, high organic soils, and as companions to deep-rooted trees, such as oak, hickory, and pine.

These shrubby deciduous rhododendrons add a sparkle of color which seems to bring many woodland landscapes alive while requiring little or no maintenance. Further, they have few insect and disease problems.

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SPECIFICATIONS

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