

# PROBLEM MANAGEMENT

by Balakrishna Rao, Ph.D.

## Pruning azaleas

**Problem:** We need some guidelines for timing and proper methods of pruning azaleas in Georgia. We have to deal with small to large, overgrown plants in different places. (Georgia)

**Solution:** By proper and selective pruning, the size, appearance and flowering can be improved, and diseased plant parts can be removed. When azaleas are not pruned on schedule, they often tend to produce long stems without many branches and flowers. This can be corrected by "heading back" (reducing in length) and encouraging the development of several side branches. The ideal time for such pruning is soon after flowering to produce strong branching.

These plants should be fertilized and watered as needed to stimulate new growth. This new growth can be "tip pruned" (pinched) by early July so it can produce more lateral branches. This method will produce compact plants which will produce more flowers.

Dead and dying branches due to diseases or winter kill should be removed. For smaller branches use hand pruners, and for larger branches use lopping shears. Cut back into healthy tissues. For larger wounds, application of wound dressing materials may be beneficial.

When plants grow too fast and overgrow the desirable size, or when planning to move large plants to another location, they should be pruned properly to maintain their size and shape. Species of azaleas, like Southern Indian (Indica or Formosa type), grow fast and may require severe pruning. To minimize shock, severe pruning should be done three to four weeks before blooming. The growth produced after this can be further pruned to develop a compact growing plant. Small azaleas should be pruned several times during the growing season to produce a nice compact plant. Maintain good fertilization, watering, and pest management programs to ensure good growth and flowering.

## Turf in shade

**Problem:** What would be the best way to establish turf under large trees such as maple or oak? Is it better to cut roots and put down soil and seed or simply topdress with soil on existing roots and then seed? Which would be better? (Ohio)

**Solution:** The two basic problems are shade and lots of surface-growing roots. Growing turf under trees, like maple and oak that have dense canopies, is possible. Selectively thinning the tree canopy will allow enough sunlight to penetrate through the tree to the grass beneath. Even a slight increase in sunlight may be enough to allow the turf to grow and remain reasonably thick. This process will have to be repeated every few years if the tree is a fast grower and fills in the open spaces.

If pruning the tree still doesn't provide enough sunlight to sustain turfgrass, then a shade-tolerant

ground cover should be used in place of grass underneath the tree. Trees that develop surface-growing roots are doing so because of compacted soil and/or poor drainage.

Oxygen is the prime limiting factor in determining depth of root growth. Compacted or wet soils do not have the oxygen-holding capacity to allow roots to grow beyond a few inches of the soil surface. Cutting the roots will only result in more surface roots developing later. Topdressing will further stress the tree by suffocating the sensitive feeder roots.

As little as one inch of soil over the root system can kill the entire tree. Surface rooting is the symptom of a problem, so cutting the roots or topdressing with soil is only a temporary solution. Aerifying the soil with a coring machine or an auger will allow oxygen and water, as well as the root system, to penetrate deeper into the soil horizon. Not only will the growing conditions of the tree be improved, but it will also be easier to maintain turf underneath a tree without surface roots.

## Tall fescue seeding

**Problem:** We seeded some lawns under shady conditions with a good mixture of certified tall fescue seeds around the second week of September last year. Seeding was done with an aro-seeder and lawns were well watered after seeding and during establishment. However, we are seeing a large number of 3/4-inch bare spots now. Will these areas fill in? Do we have to reseed now? Is it better to wait till spring? (Ohio)

**Solution:** Since you have used certified seeds with a good percentage of germination and used an aro-seeder, you should have obtained good results. Several possibilities exist as to the cause of the problem you are experiencing. If the soil was not prepared well, some of the tree roots might have prevented proper seeding and establishment.

Another possibility might be that seeds were washed off or rotted, or the area remained dry at times. Tall fescues spread slowly by producing tillers, which grow laterally, resulting in a bunch-type growth habit. Because of this growth habit, 3/4-inch bare spots may not fill in for a long time. To correct the situation you can consider dormant overseeding, or better yet, wait until spring and see how much of an area may need reseeding and then overseed. Maintain good watering throughout the germination and establishment period for better results.



Balakrishna Rao is Director of Lawn Care Technical Resources for The Davey Tree Co., Kent, Ohio.

Questions should be mailed to Problem Management, Landscape Management, 7500 Old Oak Boulevard, Cleveland, OH 44130. Please allow 2-3 months for an answer to appear in the magazine.