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SATSUKI AZALEA

The Satsuki azalea is one of the most sought after and satisfying of all bonsai subjects. Foremost among its reasons for popularity are the prolific amount of spectacular flowers when in full bloom.

In addition, the plant adapts well to container cultivation. Trunks thicken up substantially and relatively quickly. They adapt well to substantial pruning and easily develop new vigorous buds on old wood.

Azaleas, as the botanical name implies, are members of the Rhododendron family. Azaleas, however, have smaller leaves making them prime candidates for the bonsai artist.

Satsuki is a Japanese term which means "fifth month", or late spring and refers to when most Satsuki bloom. Satsuki have become the most popular for bonsai followed closely by the Kurume varieties. There are literally hundreds of different varieties of both species, mostly grouped according to the shape and colours of their flowers.

The Satsuki is a popular choice among Bonsai. They are very hardy and can produce magnificent flowers ranging up to seven inches in diameter. Of all shrubs with flowers, the Azalea is by far the most dramatic with brilliant blooms of radiant colours blooming in late spring. While there are many species of Azalea, the Satsuki, or Rhododendron indicum is easily one of the most popular, featuring an excellent low, twiggy habit with lovely funnel shaped unscented flowers in whites, pinks, reds and purples in an endless array of patterns. The Satsuki is identified by two blossoms on the end of the terminal; they also have slightly hairy leaves budding out freely from even fairly old wood. Because the azalea is highly coveted in Japan, there have been hundreds of different varieties, in every colour except yellow, bright orange, and true blue.

Temperature:

Keep outside until temps drop in winter just taking care to protect your tree from the stress of prolonged heavy freezing, and then move into an unheated greenhouse or similar. Temperatures kept between 1 to 12°C will be best. Once dormant, it should be placed in a protected location and perhaps a layer of mulch laid around the pot. Mice and rabbits find the soft bark of the azaleas particularly tasty so keep that in mind when you select your storage spot.

Lighting:

Satsuki do well in a bright location that is filtered from direct scorching sunlight or with at least about half a day of direct sunlight as it dislikes being kept in full sun permanently. This will also fade and ruin the flowers and damage the roots; because they demand cooler temperatures to stay healthy. It can take full sun for a little while, but will look best when in a light shade.

Watering:

Azaleas do not like any hint of dry soil so be sure to keep the soil evenly moist at all times. The tree should be watered at least once a day throughout the growing season to ensure that the soil mass remains moist but not soggy.

Azaleas do not like to dry out; if allowed to do so, the fine fibrous roots will quickly desiccate and die.

When you water, it is best to try to use lime free tap water or rainwater because Azaleas hate lime. It becomes especially important in hard-water areas to water with rainwater only to avoid lime deposits building up in the soil. This build up can also be reduced with correct watering techniques. Water thoroughly with a fine rose on a hose or completely submerge the roots and lower few inches of trunk in a large tub of water until the bubbles stop. (It may take up to 20 minutes for all of the bubbles to stop. Don't leave the tree in the water for prolonged periods or overnight as that will rot the fine root hairs). This method ensures all parts of the soil get water and there will be a total air exchange within the soil. Azaleas like perfect drainage as air is essential to ensure that rot does not develop in the root ball.

Fertilizing:

Feed your azalea at least every other week in the spring time until the flowering period is over. Use a weak solution of a balanced organic fertilizer for ericaceous/acid loving/lime hating plants until flowering starts then be sure to stop, otherwise feeding during blooming will result in loss of flowers and flower buds in favour of leaf growth.

Using a solid organic fertiliser pellets such my own brand or Japanese Bio-Gold is ideal. Follow instructions on the packs.

Thereafter, monthly feedings will be adequate. In the late summer or early autumn a lower nitrogen liquid fertilizer should be used. This will happen naturally with organic pellets. This will help the tree to set buds and blossoms for next season.

Pruning / Training:

Azaleas have particularly brittle branches and tender bark which makes the use of aluminium wire desirable. Aluminium wire is softer and will work better than copper.

In fact, aluminium wire was specifically developed for use by Japanese azalea growers, although today, it is widely used for all types of bonsai. Plastic tape or raffia can also be used to protect sensitive bark. It is important to make clean cuts with a sharp tools and to seal all wounds to the tree with a cut paste or Kyonal wound sealant immediately.

After the tree finishes flowering, it is important to remove all the dead flowers at the flower's base including the little stalk, to prevent the tree from forming seed pods and encourage new leaves.

The best time to wire and shape is in November, when major work can be done. Light wiring can be done at other times as needed, but with care. The azalea is very brittle and care must be taken when attempting any heavy bending.

To keep your Satsuki healthy and happy, you should remove any dead flowers and leaves immediately. To enhance the overall structure of the Azalea, it is important that yearly growth be removed or trained as soon as the flowering season ends. Then, any secondary shoots should be pruned before the end of July. Azaleas respond well to hard pruning and if pruned back to a stump after flowering will bud-back prolifically and can be shaped in just about any bonsai style. The most common styles used include the root-over-rock, semi-cascade, windswept, slanting, and informal upright, which look great on both twin and multiple trunk azaleas.

Insects / Pests:

Azaleas can be susceptible to whiteflies, scale insects, caterpillars, aphids, mildew, budblast, rust, leaf gall, petal blight and lime-induced chlorosis (if soil not acidic enough).

Never spray open flowers with insecticides or fungicides as this will cause them to wilt and fall.

Most insects can be combated with a proprietary insecticide. I recommend 'Rose Clear Ultra' for insects and fungal problems. Spray proactively or at first signs of trouble. A winter wash of diluted lime-sulphur can also be applied in mid December and mid January to kill any overwintering pests.

Propagation:

Because of their ability to bud back readily on old wood, azaleas are seen as very "collectable". You can propagate your azalea from softwood cuttings taken in early summer, after flowering has finished to swap with friends for new varieties.

Repotting:

Azaleas like a somewhat acidic soil content. It is therefore advisable to a specialist soil like Kanuma to repot you tree. If it has been grown in Kanuma soil it will not like being potted into a compost type soil and vice versa. Azaleas develop fine, fibrous feeder roots with very few larger tap roots. They withstand substantial root pruning be careful not to remove too much from directly under the trunk (the 'Shin' or heart of the root ball.) Although I think its best done in the early spring, just before flowering. It can be done after flowering but personally I don't recommend this unless you can give the tree perfect recovery conditions and lots of almost hourly attention to monitor watering and heat stress.

Choose a fairly deep pot for your azalea. Repotting it into a very shallow bonsai dish will invariably end in disaster. Azaleas prefer to live in deeper containers as this provides a more even moisture level that will not dry out as quickly as a shallow pot.

If you choose to transplant before the tree flowers, it is advisable to remove some flower buds so as to avoid placing an unnecessary strain on the plant. A healthy tree will cope well and still flower for you. The roots systems grow vigorously and will probably need transplanting and root pruning every three years or when the soil loses its percolation properties. This can be a delicate operation so if in any doubt seek proper expert advice. Repotting can also be done in the late autumn, but with care.

Other Information

Flowers take a tremendous amount of energy from the plant. Some will remove all but one bud from each branch tip before flowering to ease the demand for energy on the tree. It is best to remove all the faded flowers as soon as they appear. As soon as the flowering is past its best, remove all old, new flowers and any remaining buds, all at the same time. Don't be tempted to wait for every flower to fade. Make sure all necessary pruning is done before the last day of July or the tree may not have time to develop the next years flower buds. Taking this step will ensure that the following year, the buds will open at the same time. If you see the flowers coming too soon in the spring, remove a few of the largest buds before they open, and try putting the plant in a cooler and slightly shadier location which will slow down flower development.

Happy bonsaiing!!

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