

# Pruning Azaleas

By Charlie Andrews—Cumming, Georgia

It's a sorry state of affairs when you have to start an article on pruning with a confession. I'm a low-maintenance kind of guy and like the natural look. I don't want to get into high maintenance activities like topiary. I also have good advice that I don't always get around to following. Just ask my wife.

## Two Types

Azaleas do not need much pruning, but there are times and reasons when some pruning is desired or beneficial. The two types of azaleas, evergreen and deciduous, have distinctly different habits. The evergreen azaleas are more compact, dense and twiggy. Generally, they are not as tall as the deciduous azaleas, but they can have vigorous shoots (new growth). The deciduous type varies from low to tall, depending on the species. Deciduous azaleas are usually more open, and often there are several feet between swirls of branches. Both types vary in height from about a foot to 10 feet and more. Branches cluster near the end of the previous year's growth.

## Avoid or Minimize Pruning

A few simple steps can avoid or minimize pruning. Choose the appropriate cultivar or species. Don't select a plant that will eventually get 15 feet tall and plant it in front of your bay window. Plant in a suitable location for the mature size, both height and width. Taller plants should be in the back of a bed. Avoid close spacing. Allow enough space for your plants to age gracefully. Be aware of paths and other limitations when you are considering the plant's location. Do not over fertilize. Fertilizer will stimulate vegetative growth. Use sunlight as a natural pruner. When your azaleas receive adequate sunlight, they do not have to reach for it. Azaleas planted in too much shade will become lanky. You can, though, take advantage of lankiness and prune your azaleas into more of a tree shape. I have seen this done in an attractive manner. Also train plants when young. Don't wait until they are young adults. A little pruning at a young age will result in a more compact but natural-looking plant. Likewise, a little annual pruning is better than trying to restore a badly neglected plant.

## Height

The height of an unpruned azalea depends on several factors. Primary is the species or cultivar. There are azaleas that are almost ground covers and some over 20 feet tall. Sunlight, as mentioned, has significant effect in reducing the height of a healthy plant. It is not necessary for a plant in ample sunlight to reach for the sun in order to generate its chlorophyll. Plant vigor affects height. A healthy plant will be more vigorous than a weak one. As mentioned, fertilizer stimulates vigor and thus growth. Also heavy pruning may cause a plant to generate excessive growth.



Photo Elizabeth Andrews

▲ Photo 1—Overgrown 6-foot-tall evergreen azalea with lanky shoots in need of pruning. Charlie Andrews shown ready to prune. The sandwich board is 3-1/2 feet tall, shown for scale.

## Why Prune?

Why do you want to prune? First, it is not always essential. It is often a matter of preference. Of course, one should remove dead and damaged wood and consider removing older, barely growing wood. Severe pruning can rejuvenate old, out-of-bounds plants. You may have a plant that has outgrown its space and need to be brought back within bounds. You may want to train a young plant to make it more compact, with less length between swirls of branches. A justifiable reason may be to keep flowers near to eye level. If a plant is too vigorous and puts on more than 12 inches of spring growth, topping that growth will yield a more compact plant. Unless you have expensive equipment or unlimited labor, pruning is necessary to successfully transplant a mature plant. You could prune out sport branches, but why? On my orchid 'George Lindley Taber' plants, I love the reverted purple 'Omurasaki' branches and the occasional white 'Mrs. G. Gerbing' sport branches. Finally, you might want to extensively prune if you like topiary.





Photo Elizabeth Andrews

▲ Photo 2—After pruning, the azalea is reduced to no more than half the sandwich board’s height.



Photo Elizabeth Andrews

▲ ▼ Photo 3 & 4—Close-ups of pruners ready to cut back unwanted leggy growth. The cuts are made just above where he wants to generate new growth.

## When to Prune?

Late winter and early spring are perhaps best. If you want bouquets, prune at flowering time. For evergreen azaleas, it is effective to prune immediately after flowering, but for deciduous azaleas this rule of thumb does not apply because some of these species bloom as late as October. For topiary and extreme compact effect, prune when new growth is 4 to 6 inches. Late summer pruning may prevent flower bud formation for the next year. Late fall pruning may encourage late growth and cold damage.

## Pruning Evergreen Azaleas

Evergreen azaleas tend to be more compact than our native azaleas with shorter distance between nodes and thus more branched, dense, and twiggy. Habit is still affected by the cultivar chosen and the amount of shade.

Many do not realize that some azalea cultivars can reach heights of 8 to 10 feet and even more. Many old cultivars originally considered low growing are only slow growing and now we know they can eventually reach medium and tall heights. There is a whole spectrum of heights down to dwarf plants less than a foot tall. Simply choosing an appropriate cultivar and location can practically eliminate the need to prune. Examples are: Low— Satsuki, e.g., ‘Amaghasa’, ‘Eikan’, ‘Flame Creeper’, ‘Gumpo’; *nakaharai*, e.g., ‘Mount Seven Star’, ‘Wintergreen’; Robin Hill, e.g., ‘Hilda



Photo Elizabeth Andrews

Nibblet’. Medium— many Glenn Dales, e.g., ‘Glacier’, ‘Fashion’, ‘Buccaneer’; many others. Tall—*kaempferi*, e.g., ‘Fedora’; *Mucronatum*, e.g., ‘Gulf Pride’; Southern Indica, e.g., ‘George L. Taber’, ‘Judge Solomon’, ‘Formosa’.

The evergreens in general require more shade than our natives but still need some sunlight to perform at their best. Filtered sunlight or morning sun with afternoon shade is best.





Photo Charles Andrews

▲ Photo 5—A young well-trained 'Admiral Semmes' azalea.



Photo Charles Andrews

▲ Photo 6—An unpruned *R. colemanii* that could have been pruned when young to be more compact, with less distance between branches.

On evergreen azaleas, flowers and vegetative growth come from the same terminal buds formed on new growth. Cutting branches before the buds have opened will reduce flowering, but sometimes that is a small price to pay. Latent vegetative buds will emerge from below the cut.

Evergreen azaleas will frequently send up tall vertical shoots above the top of the plant. These vigorous stems can be pruned to make the plant more compact or left alone for a more natural appearance. When pruning the vertical shoots, prune well into the plant, even at the base of the shoot. [See Photos 1-4, Pruning Evergreen Azaleas.]

Some azaleaphiles like extremely dense plants, so dense one cannot see inside the plant at all. While this is not to my taste, I accept it is a style for some. This type of pruning is often done with hedge shears, limiting the new growth to only a few inches. The cuttings can be used for propagation.

Occasionally one will have an old plant that has gotten well out of bounds and needs rejuvenating. Healthy azaleas can stand radical pruning and be cut to within 6 to 8 inches of the ground, depending on the size of the plant. This severe pruning can also be spread over a period of three years.

Evergreen azaleas in denser shade tend to be leggy. One technique I observed in a shady Virginia garden utilized this supposed fault. Many old azaleas were limbed up to resemble small trees whose canopies with the flowers were at or just above eye level.

## Pruning Deciduous Azaleas

People often ask about pruning native azaleas. But the fact is these plants need very little pruning. Depending on the circumstances, however, some pruning may be beneficial.

Our native azaleas tend to have a pleasant, natural habit, which varies according to the species and variety. Some are low growing. These include *Rhododendron atlanticum*, *R. canadense*, *R. viscosum* var. *aemulans* and *R. viscosum* var. *montanum*. Some can be low or get a little taller, including *R. alabamense*, *R. flammeum*, *R. cumberlandense*, *R. periclymenoides*, *R. prinophyllum*, and other forms

## To Avoid Pruning

- ▶ Choose appropriate cultivar or species
- ▶ Plant in a suitable location for the mature size
- ▶ Do not over-fertilize
- ▶ Use sunlight as a natural pruner
- ▶ Train plants when young
- ▶ Prune a little annually, avoid severe pruning later

of *R. viscosum*. Others can become tall. These include *R. canescens*, *R. austrinum*, *R. arborescens*, *R. colemanii*, *R. eastmanii*, *R. calendulaceum*, *R. vaseyi*, *R. prunifolium*, *R. viscosum* var. *serrulatum*, and *R. occidentale*. There is also a tall form of *R. alabamense*. How tall, depends. A healthy, vigorous plant will grow more each season. Over fertilizing will increase the vigor. A garden plant in good sunlight will be more compact, less lanky, and with stockier branchlets. A plant in too much shade will tend to reach up for sunlight.

Why would one want to prune a native azalea? One reason is a healthy young deciduous azalea often sends up vigorous new vertical shoots that can be 2 to 4 feet long in a single season. Side branches form the following year near the terminal end of this year's shoots. Long shoots mean a long distance between side branches, making the plant more open and less compact. One may want to keep the majority of blooms near eye level, not well up in the air. This is not usually a problem with the low or medium height azaleas, but can be with the taller varieties. At times there may be damaged or dead wood that ought to be removed. If you are transplanting a mature native azalea first prune it to 4-6 inches to the ground. You will be removing over 90% of its feeder roots even with a large root ball, and the top must be balanced with the roots. A final possible reason is to





Photo Charles Andrews

▲ Photo 7—An unpruned *R. arborescens* growing in a good bit of sunlight. Note its compactness.



Photo Charles Andrews

▲ Photo 8—A mature, unpruned native azalea natural hybrid. Note the rounded crown that has developed.

rejuvenate a neglected plant that has overgrown its location. [See Photos 5-8, Pruning Deciduous Azaleas.]

An unpruned, open, mature native azalea is not necessarily a bad thing. It has a look perfect for a natural setting. Some of the medium-size types, such as *R. flammeum* or *R. cumberlandense*, will develop an arching crown top. The top is where most of the flowers will be. Given enough room, taller azaleas like *R. canescens* or *R. vaseyi* can develop multiple tall trunks that often bend toward the outside, yielding an overall rounded form. It will take some years before these attractive mature habits develop.

If you want more compact plants, the first action should be to place your native azaleas in ample sunlight. Much of the literature calls azaleas shade plants, and many gardeners and homeowners may not realize light shade is preferred. The earlier the plant blooms, the more sun it can tolerate. Even in the climate of north Georgia zone 7b/8a, native azaleas that bloom in May or earlier can tolerate almost full sun. For less faded blossoms, morning sun with some afternoon shade is best. Later bloomers need more shade. A usually tall-growing *R. arborescens* will need almost no pruning if given ample sunlight. It will develop as a full, compact, lower-growing plant without the pruners.

The time to start training your native azalea is when it is a young plant. Don't let your young plant develop long vertical shoots. Prune them back to 8 to 12 inches. Continuing this process as the plant ages will result in a more compact plant. Pruning new growth is easy work. With fingernails or hand pruners in mid to late May (for the Atlanta, Georgia area, adjust for your area), pinch or snip the top of the new growth. Performing this easy task in May results in two rewards. Snipping the new growth in May allows flower buds time to grow for the next year, and this is a good time to take cuttings for propagating.

Deciduous azaleas often have multiple trunks. While species such as *R. calendulaceum* usually have only two or three, *R. canescens* can have as many as a dozen. To avoid a jumble of side branches, prune out branches growing across

the center of the plant. Limiting the number of trunks when young will result in larger trunks on the mature plant, giving a more tree-like shape.

Some of our natives are stoloniferous and will spread by runners. They are not what you call invasive, and knowing which types tend to be stoloniferous will help in your plant placement. If getting out of bounds, these horizontal stems growing along or just below the ground can easily be cut off and, as an added bonus, propagated for new plants.

Our natives can live for many years. Some are known to be over a hundred years old. This does not mean that individual trunks do not lose vigor and decline. Pruning out an old trunk will cause the plant to regenerate new growth. Cut the old trunk low to the ground. This will stimulate the plant to send up new shoots below the cut or from the root crown.

## Tools and Techniques

Pruning tools can run from your fingernails to a chain saw. New growth can be snipped off with fingernails. Old, large trunks can be cut out with a chain saw. In between tools include hand pruners, loppers, hedge shears, and pruning saws.

Here are some pruning techniques to consider. Develop a regular annual pruning program. Pinch or snip tall young

## When to Prune

- ▶ Late winter and early spring perhaps best
- ▶ Prune at flowering time for bouquets
- ▶ Effective to prune evergreen azaleas immediately after flowering
- ▶ Pinch new growth on deciduous azaleas and use for cuttings
- ▶ Prune when new growth is 4 to 6 inches for topiary effect
- ▶ Late summer pruning may prevent next year's flower bud formation
- ▶ Late fall pruning may encourage late growth and cold damage

growth in May for deciduous and June for evergreen (adjust for your season). Combine pruning with propagation of cuttings and bringing bouquets into the house. Frequently wipe tools with 10% bleach solution. Shear evergreens when new growth is 4 to 6 inches. For corrective pruning, cut down and inside the shrub, where you want new growth to start. Don't hesitate to severely prune healthy but overgrown plants down to 4 to 6 inches. Before digging for rescue, prune mature deciduous transplants 4 to 6 inches from ground.

## Summary

In summary, do as I say, not as I often do. Be smart. Minimize the need to prune. Apply a little regular pruning but know that for azaleas major pruning is OK.

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Charles Andrews of Cumming, Georgia, is vice president of the ASA, a member of the Vaseyi Chapter of the ASA, and a former member of the Oconee Chapter. He is a plant lover in general, but his heart is with azaleas. He enjoys writing and speaking on azalea topics, contributes articles to *The Azalean*, and serves on the journal's Editorial Advisory Board. He also serves as president of the Azalea Chapter of the ARS. For over 35 years, Charles has been studying American deciduous azaleas.