

On Azaleas and Sun

By Will Ferrell—Kernersville, NC

I would like to throw out some thoughts and observations on azaleas and sun, as much in hopes of starting a conversation on the subject as anything else.

The conventional ideal is to plant azaleas under high shade, light shade, or morning sun with afternoon shade. Not heavy shade but shade in the hottest parts of the day for sure. But azalea lovers often run out of these ideal situations. So a question arises as to which azaleas can best thrive in more sun.

Certainly the earlier in spring an azalea blooms, the less its bloom will be degraded by direct sun. Thus the blooms of Glenn Dales 'Geisha' and 'Delight', Sandra McDonald's 'Springtime Blush', or early Kurumes, tend to be little troubled by direct sun, though lack of tree canopy would leave them more susceptible to a late frost.

Later, hotter, direct sun tends to rob a flower of any tendency towards blueness, to render a true red more of an orange-red, and to bleach and generally shorten the fresh beauty of an azalea bloom. (More than one *calendulaceum* or *cumberlandense* that was a nice red in the mountains was found to be orange when grown in the hotter lowlands¹.) Note the change in color of the same daylily in Figure 1 from the cool of the early morning to warmer noontime in late June.



Figure 1. Non-azalea demonstration of temperature effect: daylily on the left photographed in the cool of an early morning and then again (on the right) after a few hours of sun/heat.

Are there cultivars whose blooms are relatively sunproof? Years ago, when I bought the Ilam deciduous hybrid 'Peachy Keen', the tag claimed its bloom was sunproof, but I planted it in shade and cannot confirm this. I have an evergreen azalea which I rooted (to save from an old home being demolished) that I think is 'Pericat Pink' that seems remarkably sunproof. 'Aromi Sunny-side-up' seems somewhat sunproof. But otherwise among my roughly 170 cultivars, I have not seen sunproof blooms. I would be very interested in ASA members' experience of cultivars whose blooms they



Figure 2. Sandra MacDonald's 'Springtime Blush' backed by *Anemone nemerosa* 'Vestal'.

have observed to be particularly sunproof or heatproof. The knowledge would be worth sharing.

One of the most sun-tolerant azaleas it seems to me is *Rhododendron austrinum* (and many of its children). Of course it tends to bloom rather early so that sun damage to the bloom is negligible, but the foliage also seems more tolerant of sun than most azaleas. And I think some of the *R. austrinum*-related cultivars actually need a good bit of sun to bloom well.

Native azalea maven Ernest Koone of Lazy K Nursery observes that early-blooming species and hybrids generally perform well in full sun with good care. He singles out 'Sommerville's Sunrise', 'Rising Sun'², 'Magenta Rose Flame', and 'Razzberry'; Beasley's 'My Mary' and 'Yellow Delight'; and *R. canescens*

Figure 3. 'Aromi Sunny-side-Up' backed by 'Homebush'.



‘Varnadoe’s Phlox Pink’ as taking sun well. But he adds that, although they withstand full sun, they present a more pleasant experience in moderate shade.

On evergreen azaleas, there is the problem of too much sun promoting lace bugs on the foliage. I can attest to the success of completely eliminating lace bugs via the IPM guidelines of planting azaleas in amended soil, in adequate shade, and with other foliage that host lace-bug eaters. I spray no chemicals. But you can expect some lace bugs on most azaleas if planted in too much sun.

Buddy Lee’s Autumn Twist[®], Autumn Royalty[®], and Autumn Sangria^{®3} are remarkable for their immunity to lace bugs. In addition, they fall-bloom well without having to be planted in a lot of direct sun. (‘August-to-Frost’ and ‘Sekidera’ also have this kind of substantial coriaceous [leathery] lace-bug-resistant leaf.)

This brings up what I see as an issue for remontant⁴ azaleas generally. They mostly need to be in significant direct sun to fall-bloom well. But when you plant them that way, they end up having many blooms melt in the heat of August and September. I like Autumn Amethyst[®] because it waits until late September to bloom and then blooms in early spring; it is a pretty good plant for relatively sunny locations for that reason.

Turning the coin over, are there cultivars that are particularly good at blooming in deep shade? Late blooming Satsukis need a lot of shade to not melt in my zone 7B Piedmont (900' elevation) garden in late May. ‘Banshin’, ‘Asahi-no-hikari’, ‘Issho-no-haru’, and ‘Haru-no-sono’ bloom in a lot of shade fairly well; ‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’, not so much.

The rich dark redness of mid-season bloomer ‘Midnight Flare’ endures much better in a lot of shade, and fortunately it blooms well in shade.⁵

Alas, it must be mentioned that too much shade encourages legginess of the plant structure and discourages blooming. Limbing up your tree canopy can make a surprisingly positive improvement.

Indubitably, there is a lot more to say on the subject of sun and azaleas, and what I have offered is fairly subjective as well. So I hope ASA members will share their experiences and observations. Not just on the question of relatively sun-proof blooms and cultivars that bloom well in deep shade, but on other aspects as well.

Notes and References

1. Similarly, I’ve observed some *R. maximums* to have esthetic, subtle pink/lavender colorations to their blooms in the mountains but always to be worthlessly washed out in the Southern Piedmont heat.
2. Editor’s Note: ‘Rising Sun’ may not be the correct cultivar



Figure 4. ‘Midnight Flare’ benefits from some shade.

name. We are awaiting confirmation at press time and will run a correction in the next issue, if that proves necessary.

3. The names with ® are trademark names commonly used, not the absurd formulaic cultivar names, which I will not deign to mention. With millions of plants in the world, each having more than one name is asking for trouble; it didn’t work out very well for the Earl of Oxford (who surely wrote what is attributed to Shakespeare).

4. Remontant azaleas are those that flower again or repeatedly throughout the growing season.

5. An additional tangent related to red native azaleas: One encounters a lot of discussion of what is the best true red deciduous azalea. My vote is for ‘Wallowa Red’ with maybe ‘King’s Red’ or ‘Kelly’s Red’ (unregistered Strickland) next best, but I’d love to see someone especially interested in that subject do an article devoted to it.

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