

AZALEA (*Rhododendron*)

Flowering bonsai are grown for the spectacle they provide when in bloom. Among the most dramatic are the azaleas which are deciduous or evergreen flowering shrubs that love a humid atmosphere and are drought sensitive. *Azalea indicum* has large leaves and flowers whilst those of *Kurume* and *Satsuki* azaleas are small. A great number of hybrids will be found to choose from, each with distinctly different blooms.



Working with azaleas is begun immediately after the shrubs have flowered. It may not be left too late because there is a danger of destroying the formation of the following year's flower buds which appear at the tips of



the branchlets. Azaleas produce masses of fine roots. Be careful of pruning the surface roots when reducing the root-ball. On the above ground section, and because Azalea wood is brittle, styling is preferably done via the clip-and-grow method, wiring only on twigs. Growth can be shortened fearlessly because azaleas back bud profusely.

The potting soil used is the standard well-draining mix to which an extra part of moisture-retaining properties is added to the soil. PH should be acidic 4,5 to 5,5. Alternatively obtain acid potting compost from Garden Centres. When formulating the mix remember that, although azaleas like humid roots, they do not like soggy soil. Therefore it should contain at least 1/3 of sharp aggregate.

The humidity of the soil has to be maintained at all times. Rain water is best because it soft and almost neutral. The maintenance of soil acidity poses no problem if we conscientiously root-trim and repot yearly. Otherwise, to maintain soil acidity, we must feed small doses of ammonium sulphate once at monthly intervals, especially if municipal water is used. Another method for ensuring continued soil acidity is to water exclusively with the diluted extract of used tea-leaves. Or add a few drops of vinegar to your water.

The vigorous root system of azaleas growth makes it necessary to pot them in deeper pots.

In hot, dry climates Azaleas adapt only to dappled sunlight or early morning sun. In rainless areas a refreshing shower with a fine hose spray helps to revive heat-exhausted plants. Trimming is done after the flowers have faded but is suspended in autumn until the following year. During flowering, remove old flowers as the flowers pull a lot of nutrition from the tree.