



Satsuki Azalea Notes, March:

This is the beginning of the busy spring season for all you azalea lovers.

Trees in the first year of the three year cycle will be repotted this year. Repot satsuki azaleas during late March and April, just prior to activity beginning in the plant. If you haven't already, remove all flower buds as flowers place a high demand for water intake and this places additional stress on a plant that has had its roots trimmed. Remove 1/3 to 1/2 of the lower portion of the root ball. Hollow out a bowl shaped portion of the root ball directly under the center. Remove 1/3 of the outer edge of the root ball. Remove the top 1/2 to 1 inch of soil and cut the roots flat. This will encourage new surface roots.

Do not do any work on the top portion of the tree in the year that you repot the plant. Wire the tree securely into the pot. Using a chopstick or similar probe, settle the soil among the roots to eliminate air pockets. Never transplant a satsuki azalea after flowering. The tree is in a weakened state at this time. This is contrary to what the books suggest. Use extra soil to cover the lower part of the trunk. Only remove this extra soil when displaying the tree. Always cover the soil of a transplanted tree with long fibered sphagnum moss. The top layer of root growth near the trunk is most important to the health and vigor of the azalea. Saturate the repotted tree and place in a warm, sheltered place. Water only when the soil shows signs of dryness. Do not fertilize for four to six weeks. Then use a 1/2 strength solution for the next four weeks. Afterwards you may go to your regular program.

Trees in the second year of the three year cycle will be trimmed and wired this year. This month remove all the flower buds. The tree should not be allowed to flower this year so it may regain its vigor. Trim branches in keeping with the intended style. Cut ends where there are multiple branches down to one or two. Begin by trimming the main branch first. Use the length and size of this branch as a means to establish balance for all the other branches, each somewhat smaller as you progress up the tree. Remove all downward growing branches. When wiring, first bend the branch to the position that you want it and then apply the wire. Wire the main portion of the branch first. Then apply wire to the secondary branches. Lastly wire all the tips of the branches. "Y" type branches are wired to reduce the distance between them to look more pleasing. Wiring should remain in place for about three months. At this time the branch should be set. Monitor the wires constantly to make sure they are not cutting into the wood. Trimming of branches may be carried out until June. Plants should be fed from now on. It is important to feed plants well at this time in order to build up their strength.

Trees that are in the third year of the three year cycle will be allowed to flower this year. As a satsuki approaches flowering, the flower buds should be thinned out. For established trees it is normal to remove about one third of the developing buds. The buds are very easy to remove just before they show color. Thin out the buds to leave only one on each terminal. Buds growing down within the foliage mass should be removed, as they will not really contribute to the display. The general aim in bud thinning is to ensure that the flowers will be evenly spaced and clearly visible to the viewer. Many bonsai growers are reluctant to carry out this bud thinning, but the result is a much better flowering display. Instead of flowers being distorted from overcrowding, each flower can open fully. The smaller number of better flowers will still be able to totally cover the foliage. My own normal practice is to remove up to one third of the buds from the front of the tree and two thirds or more from the back, where they are not seen. It is also standard practice to remove more buds from the apex, which is the weakest area of the plant. Flowers take a lot of energy from the plant. Even though we only let the bonsai flower once every three years, removing flowers that do not contribute to the display help to conserve the trees energy. Begin your fertilizer program until the flower buds show color, then stop until after flowering.