

Tree Profile: *Satsuki Azalea - Rhododendron Indicum*

General Information: The azalea is a member of the genus *Rhododendron* and belongs to a huge and diverse family of shrubs that grow all over the world from Europe, North America and even Australia. It consists of over 1000 species, with the varieties *Satsuki* and *Kurume* commonly used for Bonsai, but also the garden varieties of *Indica* find their place on shelves.

Back to the *Satsuki Azalea* which is originated in Japan and is more dwarf than other hybrid groups. The name *Satsuki* (sats-key) in Japanese means "5th-month" in the old-time lunar calendar when the *Satsuki* flower, which is from late spring through to early summer. *Satsuki* have been bred since the 1600's and there are believed to be over 3000 varieties.

The most interesting feature of the *Satsuki azalea* is that it can produce flowers in multiple colors on the same plant. It carries unstable color genes, as a *Satsuki* ages the variation can increase and it's not uncommon to have white, red and pink at the same time. Different flower shapes can also be found on the same plant. In Japan, unexpected flower colors are prized as reminders of nature's unpredictability.

Kurume azaleas are also good for bonsai, as they generally have small flowers. They flower in September rather than November for *Satsuki*, so the enjoyment of the showy display can be extended!

Lighting & Temperature: Place the *Azalea* at a bright spot, not in full afternoon sun and protect from hot winds. During wintertime, protect the tree from freezing temperatures, but do not bring indoors.

Watering: Water is the most important "fertilizer"! Use the general watering practice of giving it a good soak when the surface is dry. The roots can dry out easily, which is fatal to the tree. **Note:** The *Azalea* dislikes hard-water, use rain water if possible.

Feeding: Once every two or three weeks during its growth season using fertilizer for flowering plants or azalea specific fertilizer. If the tree flowers, stop feeding altogether. If the tree is repotted in spring, do not feed until autumn. Don't feed during the hottest month of the summer.

Pruning and wiring: The *Azalea* is one of the very few tree-species that are basally-dominant. Therefore, prune its base harder than the top to distribute growth evenly. Prune branches and new shoots in late summer, using a sealing compound to seal wounds. New flower buds will develop generally in February. *Satsuki* have a great ability to bud almost anywhere on old wood and can be cut back very hard. They also have two main flushes of growth, the first is before and the second is after flowering. Shoots should be reduced to two and the remaining shoots shortened to two sets of leaves.

Remove spent flowers as soon as they wilted, otherwise they will go into seed production! Great if that's what you're after. You need to reduce the number to the minimum you like to have and remove ALL the remaining flowers including the stalk, pistil and shell to reduce the stress on your tree! This allows for new growth to shoot!

Wiring may be done from spring through to autumn. Use special care when bending branches, as older branches are brittle. If in doubt use guy wire instead! Skipping watering the day before wiring will make the branches more flexible.

Propagation: Usually by cuttings to maintain hybrid characteristics. Take 5 to 10 cm cuttings after spring growth has hardened or use winter cuttings, which are stronger - but need special protection from frost.

Repotting: After flowering, every year for young trees, every 2-3 years for older trees. *Azaleas* like well drained soils with a pH of 4.5 to 6. Experienced growers recommend using a soil mix that contains no small particles at all, because of the dense growth of azalea roots. Different growers use different mixes, in Japan only *Kanuma* is used. A very small amount of charcoal is beneficial. Air is essential in the root ball or rot will set in. I guarantee it!

Cut a cone shape into the root ball, right up to the bottom of the trunk. The roots are thickest here and must be removed to prevent rot. Cut out pie-shaped wedges around the outside of the root ball so that the roots can grow into the gaps.

Pests and Diseases: Aphids, lacebugs, white fly, leaf miners, spider mites, scale, stem borers. Diseases include petal blight, leaf gall and root rot.

Styles: Upright and slanting styles, windswept, cascade, semi-cascade, literati, multi-trunk styles, group planting in medium to large sizes, on the rocks and in the rocks.

Pots: Usually deeper than most - deep pots drain better, glazed or unglazed, all shapes and sizes are acceptable with the exception for literati - it should be small and round.

