

Gardener finds answer to azalea problem

By Marge Alpern
special writer

There always are questions to be asked and research to be done in gardening because there are so few constant, irrefutable facts.

There is just a stream of variables.

What is true in U.S. Zone 4 may or may not be true in adjacent zones 3 or 5. Each season and each year bring different weather conditions that one must evaluate. Within one's

own back yard are mini-zones, where different soil conditions and different light exposures must be considered.

The serious gardener must look at all the facts, continue to read and ask questions and then decide what is most appropriate in his or her garden. I recently had a problem that I had to research.

LAST SPRING the deciduous azaleas in my yard didn't put out their usual beautiful display of

peach, yellow and orange flowers. I could see they needed fertilizing but decided to research the hazards and the merits of fall fertilizing. My garden literature yielded several questions and no clear answers, so I decided to discuss it with local experts.

Several nursery people discouraged fall fertilizing altogether. The plants can't take up the fertilizer. It will all leach out or it will result in soft growth, they said.

I checked further with Westcroft Gardens in Grosse Ile and Gregg Patehen at the Michigan Extension Service. With thousands of rhododendron and azaleas in their four-acre garden, Westcroft is a beautiful sight in the spring.

THESE EXPERT GROWERS follow a program of three feedings a year. They use a product they developed more than 50 years ago called Green Leaf Compound, which is basically an acid soil conditioner. This partially organic fertilizer with a se-

cret formula is spread on the plants in October, April and May.

The fall feeding either is taken up by the roots or remains in the soil to be absorbed in the spring. The Westcroft people were very specific about the timing of this application. The brief period from Oct. 10-31 is when the roots are still active, but top growth has ceased and there is no reason for concern about initiating further green growth.

The April and May feedings, of course, are to nourish the plants when they are most actively growing. Also, if iron deficiency appears in the spring in the form of yellowing foliage (Chlorosis), then Miracle, an iron foliar spray, will green the leaves in a surprisingly short time.

This frequent feeding and soil conditioning may only be necessary if the plants, like mine, don't bloom or appear vigorous. If your soil is excessively sandy or alkaline (neither of which promotes successful rhododendron growth), then frequent addi-

tions may be necessary.

Several products on the market are labeled as being especially for rhododendrons and other acid-loving plants. I applied one in October to follow the Westcroft recommendation on time of feeding. Next year, I will order Green Leaf in time.

IN SOME AREAS of southeast Oakland County, the soil is quite alkaline and sandy. The closer one lives to Woodward Avenue, the more likely one is to enjoy the rich acid soil that is essential for rhododendron growth.

The farther west of Woodward one lives, the more likely it is that the soil is sandy and alkaline because of the many lakes in this north-south strip of Oakland County.

Trying to correct soil condition is an endless task. Patchon recommends removing the soil altogether and replacing it with peat moss and other acid materials if you are determined to grow these shrubs.

Since rhododendron and azaleas are very shallow-rooted, they don't seem to object to being transplanted, especially in the fall, and it isn't a difficult job.

ALTHOUGH THERE are botanical differences between azaleas and rhododendron, to the average gardener the main difference is in their size. Rhododendron generally have a larger structure, larger leaves and larger flowers. Rhododendron are evergreen, whereas azaleas can be either evergreen or deciduous.

The larger the leaf is, the more protection is needed. Thus, the smaller-leaved azaleas will thrive in sun, while the larger leathery leaves of rhododendron need shade, as is found in a northern exposure.

By and large these plants are carefree, requiring only adequate moisture during dry spells; a rich mulch, such as chopped up acid leaves each fall, and a protected location.

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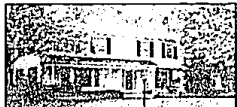
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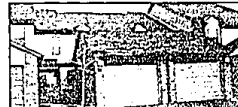
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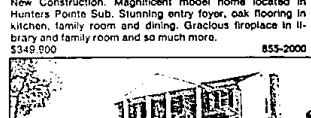
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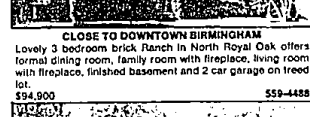
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