

MODERATOR CURTIS: In the Portland area there are a great many rhododendrons grown and the next man to speak, I would say, came by his work honestly. His father was one of the early experts in growing rhododendrons from cuttings. In fact, I think he was one of the first men to root rhododendron cuttings. So Ted had real good early training, and he is following in his father's footsteps and is doing the same good job his father did. It is a great pleasure to introduce Ted Van Veen.

SELECTING RHODODENDRON CUTTINGS

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Today the nurseryman is greatly aware of the economic importance of increasing his production and reducing his costs in order to maintain a reasonable profit margin. As a commercial grower, our nursery is ever mindful of this premise as a necessity for survival. Proper selection of cuttings can be a decisive profit maker. I come with no profound message, no new scientific discoveries, or great panacea to all rhododendron problems. The selection of cuttings still is more of an art than a science. But scientific research has been, and will continue to be, a tremendous guide for all of us. Through this discussion, I hope to share with you the methods we use in our nursery for taking cuttings. Whether you agree or disagree with these procedures is not important. Of more significance, it is an opportunity for you to add to your storehouse of information, correlate these experiences with your own, and possibly enable you to reach some new conclusions which will help the profit picture of your own operation.

Consideration must be given to the objectives of the propagator. As a large producer of rhododendrons exclusively, our aims could be quite different from someone else's. Our situation becomes complex because we carry a wide selection of varieties for varying purposes. However, in general, our goal for the major commercial varieties is to produce quality rooted cuttings quickly — cuttings which will result in healthy, multi-branched plants in the spring. And of great importance is a substantial, well-attached root ball — so necessary for the eventual survival of the plant.

Well established stock plants are essential for quality rhododendron production. Optimum rooting in the shortest time cannot be attained by field stripping production plants because of different treatments. The high nitrogen content in field plants, being pushed along for best possible growth and bud set, is not conducive to fast and high rooting percentages. And, of course, in spite of the fact that they root more easily, juvenile cuttings from small plants cannot be successfully used because they will not result in top quality stock.

Many of the stock plants in our nursery are 25 to 30 years old. Incidentally, they do not seem to have lost any of their vigor or their ability to produce a good percentage of quality plants. This mother stock is in full sun with a permanent overhead water system. In order to attain faster, better growth, all stock plant flower buds are removed just as they begin to swell prior to blooming. As a preventive maintenance measure the entire nursery is sprayed for root weevil once each year. The stock plants are carefully watched for any sign of infestation by aphids which could reduce the strength of newly-breaking shoots.

Toward the end of June the first cuttings are taken. Depending upon the weather conditions of the season, and based on rooting history records, the selection of varieties for cutting continues on through July and possible into the early part of August. A smaller second crop, so to speak, is started about the middle of September.

Since our primary goal is to produce a salable plant as quickly as possible, the larger caliber cutting wood is selected. Much of this wood will have flower buds in early formation, but this is of no concern. Flowering shoots normally have a number of axillary vegetative buds which will break into well-branched plants with the first flush of growth in the spring. This procedure is tempered somewhat for the few difficult-to-root varieties. However, these normally are not our large volume, commercial items.

Short cuttings are avoided because they result in inconsistent quality in the finished plants. The stem should be long enough so that the foliage of the prepared cutting does not touch the rooting medium. Longer stems also allow for better aeration and consequent reduction of potential rot. Cuttings with second growth in early development should not be taken. If this growth is retained in the cutting bench, quite often it will rot. Cuttings that do survive, produce only stunted and weak growth — a poor base for a quality plant. If this second growth is removed it will frequently encourage further undesirable shoots in the cutting bench. Burned and scarred foliage is another inducement for rot.

I would like to add a brief note about preparation of cuttings because it ties in with the type of cuttings we select. Stems are left a little longer than normal for rhododendron propagation because we prefer to retain a few more leaves. For greater rooting potential, the top foliage is trimmed very lightly, but a little more extensive shearing is done on the lower leaves. All flower buds are removed at the time the cutting is prepared in order to reduce potential rot and to prevent competition later with the new root system.

Our percentage of rooting is usually 85% to 90%. This percentage would be much better if we would propagate only easy-to-root varieties, tried no experiments, and did not discard all cuttings not rooted by the end of March. While this

percentage is not particularly good, we feel that the over-all quality of the finished plants is of much more importance, that the first year field survival will be better, and customer satisfaction will be greater. It would not be difficult to improve our rooting ratio by using inferior cuttings. However, we prefer the higher profit record to the higher rooting record.

MODERATOR CURTIS: Our next speaker is from Marion, Oregon, which is right close to Salem. He is doing an exceptionally fine job with azaleas and rhododendrons. Most of his material, I think, is sold by mail order. He has a number of new varieties. Here is Mr. Robert Comerford, who will speak to us on Exbury azaleas.

EXBURY AZALEA PROPAGATION

ROBERT COMERFORD
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I joined this organization to learn but after six years as a member here I am up front, and 10 minutes is a long time with nothing new to say. I shall have to take a review approach. But, the more I worked on this topic the more I felt it was needed.

I now have a specialized mail-order business selling rhododendrons and azaleas directly to the home owner at retail. Rhododendrons root well in the fall and winter and Exbury azaleas root well in spring and summer, so I can keep my benches full the year around. I have no sure-fire rooting method that has worked well three years in a row.

I have tried almost every new idea in deciduous azalea propagation through the years. I try to grow about 80 different deciduous azaleas, of which some 60 are named Exbury azaleas. A few are rather easy to propagate but, as usual, most of the best yellows, reds, and some pinks are "bearcats" to propagate.

Using a glass-house, I have tried everything from a plastic tent, plastic tent plus mist, mist only, outside mist, heating cables, no cables, coarse sand, fine sand, fine sand and peat, fine sand and peat plus Sponge Rok, sand and Sponge Rok, etc. Then Hormodin #1 and #2, Cutstart 1/2X-X-XX-XXX, Jiffy Grow #2, and none at all. I have used liquid fertilizer injections into the mist lines. I have tried lights during rooting. I have waited stubbornly for nine months to see if the cuttings would root in spite of me.

I have yet to root the deciduous azaleas in a commercially acceptable percentage by any method three years in a row. In other words I dare not stick my head out in the wholesale arena. I consider no one method the best as yet. I have tried the winter forcing — then rooting — technique mentioned