

Gardener's Information Service



PROPAGATING AZALEAS

My mother-in-law has a beautiful azalea that I would like to propagate. What are the best ways to accomplish this?

—J.K., LEHIGH, PENNSYLVANIA

There are two easy methods for propagating azaleas vegetatively, both of which should be done in late summer or very early fall: You can take semi-ripe stem cuttings or you can layer the plant.

Cuttings—of growth still green at the base, but beginning to harden—must be taken at the right time. “I check to see if it has the correct degree of ‘bendiness,’” says John Brown of the Vaseyi chapter of the Azalea Society of America. “You want it to bend about 90 degrees and then snap.” Brown adds that if you can twist the stem

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all the way around your finger, try again in a week or two. Cuttings should be about two to five inches long. Dip the cut ends in rooting hormone and insert them an inch or so deep in pots containing a mix of sharp sand and sphagnum peat or coir. Keep them relatively moist (but not wet) in a cool, protected location over winter. Move the pots to their permanent locations the following spring, but wait until fall to plant them.

To propagate by layering, bend a long, low-growing branch of the mother plant until it breaks (but does not completely separate). Lay the branch in a shallow trench, secure it with a wire staple, cover it with soil, and keep it moist. In spring, cut the branch from the main plant and carefully dig out the rooted section and transplant it. Native azaleas, says University of North Carolina horticulturist Dick Bir, “are tougher to root and keep alive” than non-native species. Bir adds that if you want to propagate a prized native azalea, layering is possible, but is much easier to achieve success with stoloniferous species—ones that spread by underground roots—such as the coast azalea (*Rhododendron atlanticum*).

A STICKY ORANGE

My blood orange tree is about four years old, still looks beautiful, flowered profusely this past winter, and set small fruits, but the leaves are covered in a clear sticky substance. I have washed off the leaves twice but the stickiness returns quickly. Is this normal?

—D.Z., HOUSTON, TEXAS

This is most likely caused by the presence of scale, aphids, or some other soft-bodied insects that are excreting a sticky substance called honeydew. The problem is not uncommon in houseplants exposed to warm, dry conditions indoors, which encourages these pests. If it is scale, you should be able to see the small, hard covers attached to the leaves and stems of the plant. Otherwise, look on the bottom of the leaves and tips of new growth for tiny insects. Fortunately, the treatment for all is similar. Use horticultural oil or insecticidal soap per label instructions, taking care to get the substance on the creatures involved. Increasing the humidity around the plant will help prevent future infestations. 

William May, Gardener's Information Service Volunteer, and Marianne Polito, Gardener's Information Service Manager.

AHS Gardening Community Listserv

The AHS Gardening Community Listserv allows for around-the-clock garden consultation with a friendly community of fellow gardeners from throughout North America. Join and get advice for your gardening problems or share your triumphs with other avid gardeners. Simply go to the AHS Web site (www.ahs.org), click on the “Community” subhead on the left side of the Home Page, then click on “Listserv” on the Community page. Scroll down the page to find the link to send e-mail to the listserv address (AHS_GARDENING-SUBSCRIBE-REQUEST@home.ease.lsoft.com) and follow the directions in the return e-mail. The ongoing discussions will come to you as e-mail. Here's a snippet from a recent exchange:

I have a three-year-old camellia loaded with flowers. However, many of them are light brown around the edges and seem to rot before they open. Somebody recently told me this is a disease and I should pick discolored flowers off the plants before they infect the other flowers. Does anybody know what this is and what I can do to prevent it?

—D.F., SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA

I just saw a video that described the problem your camellia has as a fungal disease called “petal blight.” It recommended picking off and disposing of all infected flowers from the bush as well as any petals or other flower parts that fall to the ground. Otherwise, the disease may spread from the infected flowers to others as they open. Once flowering is over for the season, you should also remove and discard any mulch underneath your camellia and replace it with two to four inches of fresh mulch to help keep any residual spores from sprouting. And keep an eye out for small, tan mushrooms emerging from the soil or mulch near your camellia—they are the fruiting bodies of the petal blight fungus and should be removed immediately.

—A.B., GULFPORT, MISSISSIPPI