Welcome to the art and culture of bonsai. Practicing bonsai can help us develop a deeper appreciation for the natural world and for our fellow human beings. Bonsai require patience, diligence, responsibility, creativity, and awareness, among other things. It is not always easy, yet bonsai can enrich our lives with beauty and inspiration. If you pay attention to your bonsai and take good care of it, you will enjoy it for many years. It's up to you! We can help you if you have questions.

AZALEA BONSAI

Rhododendron indicum

Prized for their beautiful flowers, the satsuki azaleas are among the most popular bonsai in Japan. They are temperate trees and grow best in a mild climate. They are not as winter-hardy as pines, conifers, etc., but are not as tender as tropicals. This means they should be grown outside for the summer and can be inside (cooler is better) for the winter. *Sa* means five and *Tsuki* means moon or month. The satsuki azaleas generally flower in the fifth month of the year.

WATER

No single watering schedule can be applied to bonsai. Bonsai can dry out quickly because they are planted in coarse soil and in shallow containers. In some cases, you may need to water every day, ***however***, the frequency of watering depends on the type of tree, size of pot, type of soil, climate conditions and more. The best way to tell if the bonsai needs water is to feel the soil. Stick your finger a half inch or so into the soil. Overall, if you do not feel much moisture in the top half inch of the soil, then it's time to water.

You must soak it well. Take the bonsai to the sink and either let it sit in the water for a few minutes (until it has soaked up enough from the drainage holes in the bottom), or shower from above, letting the water drain through several times. *Never* let the soil dry out completely but don't keep it soaking wet all the time. Base your watering on how the soil feels. If you are not sure if it is wet or dry, take the bonsai to the sink and soak it well. Feel it an hour later, two hours later, four hours later, etc. This can help you understand how the soil dries down.

Check it every day. If you can feel moisture, then you may not need to water. However, if your bonsai is in a very small pot and/or it is a hot or windy day, or if the bonsai is pot-bound, then you may need to water. Better safe than sorry. Feel the soil in several areas. If one part is dry, then you need to water that part.

Never let the bonsai get too dry!

LIGHT

Keep your azalea bonsai outside in at least a half-day of sun. When it is inside, put it in a window with very good light, and preferably some sun.

AIR

Always keep your Azalea bonsai in a well ventilated place. Increased air circulation improves cell growth, and helps keep the tree healthy.

FERTILIZING

When your bonsai starts to push out fresh, light-green growth, it is time to start feeding. Apply mild organic fertilizer in the form of pellets or liquid, usually with equal parts nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium (NPK) during the growing season, and less nitrogen in the fall. Apply the pellets about once a month, and the liquid about every two weeks. Once the growth of the tree starts to slow down in mid to late summer, you can cut the fertilizer back to once a month for the liquid. When the bonsai is in winter dormancy, there is no need to feed it. Remember, never fertilize a weak tree.

LOCATION

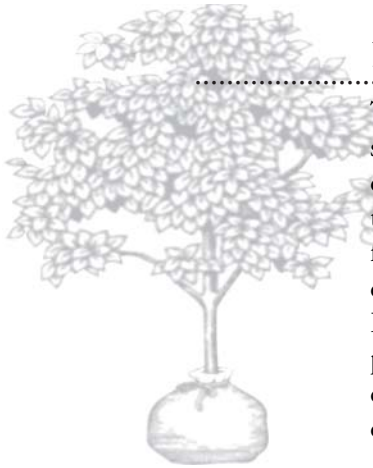
Azaleas are essentially outdoor bonsai, but most varieties are not as winter-hardy as Pines, Maples, Conifers, etc. The best place to grow your Azalea bonsai is outside from spring (when the temperatures are above 40°F consistently) through fall, in a place that gets a few hours of direct sun each day. When the temperatures start to fall below 45°F, it is time to give the Azalea some winter protection. A cool or cold room (from 35° to 55°F) is best, the cooler the better. If it is above 60°F, then the azalea may start to flower. You want to avoid this, because the tree will stay stronger if it flowers in the spring, following its natural cycle.

CLEANLINESS

As your bonsai grows, it will naturally shed some leaves. Always remove dead leaves from the tree and from the top soil, and gently shower down the foliage once a week. This will help discourage pests and diseases.

PESTS AND DISEASES

Just as children can catch a cold, your bonsai are susceptible to the common houseplant pests and diseases. The best defense is to keep your tree clean and healthy. Always observe the bonsai closely. If you notice any abnormal leaf drop, stickiness to the foliage, or visible insects, you need to treat the problem. Start by showering the tree with lukewarm water to thoroughly wash away any insects. Then, spray with a mild insecticidal soap (always follow directions when using any insecticides). One spray is usually not enough. You may need to repeat the treatment once a week for two or three weeks. Insects may be knocked back, but they can reappear in a few weeks or months. Keep a watchful eye and be diligent about treating them. Contrary to popular belief, indoor bonsai are *more* likely to be affected by insects than outdoor bonsai, so keeping your bonsai outside for the summer will strengthen it and make it more resistant to pests. Indoor trees may also get fungus and other diseases. Please learn to detect and treat these problems. You can always consult with us if stronger measures are necessary. One helpful hint for a weak Azalea: remove the flowers or flower buds. This is hard to do (we want to see the beautiful flowers), but it will help the tree put its energy into the roots and foliage, and will ultimately be the best thing for the bonsai.

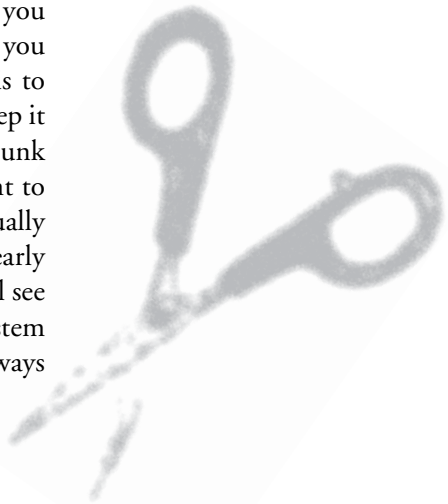


REPOTTING

The best time to repot your Azalea is when the new leaves are just starting to grow—usually in late winter or spring. This may be before, during, or after the flowering. Frequency of repotting depends on the size and age of the tree, the condition of the roots, and other factors. A younger tree may need transplanting every year. Older trees, or those in larger pots, may need repotting every two to four years. Repotting is an important procedure which usually involves root pruning, and must be done properly. We can help you with this. You can also take a workshop or consult a reliable book, bonsai hobbyist, or local bonsai club.

PRUNING AND SHAPING

Azaleas are bottom-dominant, which means that the bottom branches tend to be stronger and grow more vigorously. Keep this in mind when you are trimming the top, and be judicious. How often you trim will depend on how fast your tree grows. It's like a haircut: you trim the foliage when it starts to look out-of-shape. The key is to never cut so much as to weaken the tree, but to cut enough to keep it nicely shaped. Sucker growth, which appears at the base of the trunk and in the 'elbows' of the tree, can be removed, unless you want to cultivate a branch or trunk in that area. Major pruning is usually done when the bonsai is at its strongest, in early spring to early summer. *After* the tree flowers and the petals drop away, you will see a stem coming out of the center of where the flower was. This stem should be cut out. If you need help with trimming, you can always visit or give us a call.



DESIGN AND STYLING

The very best, most beautiful bonsai are those which look natural. If you observe aged trees in their native environment, you can feel their character and strength. This is the ideal that we strive for in bonsai. We don't see too many azaleas as formal upright, but they are frequently trained in every other major bonsai style. Since they are low-spreading trees, they are well-suited to semi-cascade. Azaleas are almost always planted in glazed containers.

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New England Bonsai Gardens is one of the finest, most beautiful bonsai nurseries in America, with a world-class bonsai collection, thousands of bonsai and pre-bonsai, pots, tools, books and accessories. We want you to succeed with bonsai. We offer workshops, private tutorials, and professional consultations to help you. Visit us at the nursery anytime—we are open year-round, seven days a week, from 9 am to 5 pm. You can also visit us online at **www.nebonsai.com**, where you can shop at our online store, access our catalog and newsletter, learn about special events, and more.

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