

Sasuki Azalea

Overview: Sasuki hybrids are Japanese-raised Azaleas bred using mainly *Rhododendron indicum* and *Rhododendron simsii*. Sasuki azaleas display a wide variety of flower colours and size, in Japan there are two or three different periodicals wholly devoted to their care and some enthusiasts will grow them exclusively. Less hardy than most Azaleas, Sasuki have an excellent low, twiggy habit and bear funnel shaped, unscented flowers in whites, pinks, reds and purples in Summer (not Spring as is typical with many *R.* species).

General Cultivation: Position - Rhododendrons dislike full sun and strong light can quickly fade and ruin flowers. Place in partial shade or dappled sunlight. During the summer months ensure that the bonsai pot is not subjected to full sun as Azaleas/Rhododendrons need their root systems to be kept cool. Rhododendrons have varying abilities to withstand frost, some species are able to withstand extremely low temperatures while others such as Sasukis are relatively frost-tender. Frost hardiness is very much down to individual hybrids and unless an individual specimen is known to be hardy to a certain temperature, it is worth providing good frost protection as soon as Winter arrives. Place under glass outside but do not bring indoors. Frost damage is most likely to effect top growth as Rhododendrons have relatively frost hardy roots. If frosts do cut back leaves they are usually regenerated the following season. **WATERING**

In hard-water areas trees must be watered with rainwater only to avoid lime deposits building up in the soil. Though not preferable, if hard water has to be used on occasions, the pH value of the compost can be adjusted by applying white vinegar to water ONCE a month. Mix at a rate of 1 tablespoon to a gallon of water.

Repotting: Repot as soon as flowering has finished annually or when roots fill pot. A lime-free soil mix MUST be used (Kiryu)

Fertilisation: Feed every two weeks in Spring until flowering, do not feed at all whilst in flower as this can result in loss of flowers and flower buds at the expense of leaf growth. After flowering has finished, feed once a month with a fertiliser intended for acid-loving/lime-hating plants.

Pruning: Azaleas/Rhododendrons are basally dominant which means they grow more strongly at the base and sides than at the top; for this reason (unlike most other species used for bonsai) they should be pruned much harder at the bottom and sides than the top.

Azaleas respond well to hard pruning and if pruned back to a stump after flowering will bud-back prolifically (assuming good health). This should never be carried out two years running though. For maintenance purposes, deadhead all flowers as they fade and then prune /pinch out secondary branches until mid-Summer.

