

This article was listed in Forest Nursery Notes, Winter 2008

**192. Rooting Native Azaleas and Stewartia.** Jenkins, M. American Nurseryman, 207(7):22-25. 2008.

# Rooting

Native

*Azaleas*

and

*Stewartia*

*The owner/manager of a Louisiana nursery sheds light on the procedures she follows to grow these two native plants using softwood cuttings.*

by MARGIE Y. JENKINS

Jenkins Farm and Nursery LLC is a medium-sized, wholesale nursery located in southeast Louisiana that specializes in growing plants in the field, as well as in containers. In the mid-1970s, a goal of the nursery was to grow native, unavailable, new and unusual plant varieties for the landscape trade. Liners of most of these were very hard to come by, if not impossible. Therefore, it was up to the nursery to propagate them from seed and cuttings.

My first experience of growing native azaleas from seed was in 1969, and I have been growing them ever since. I tried rooting them from cuttings with practically no success. I read everything I could get my hands on, tried what was recommended and had the same results.

Many years ago, our local chapter of the Azalea Society of America made a trip to the Gloster Arboretum, Gloster, MS, in the spring when the native azaleas were in full bloom. That day, I told my friend, plant collector Jim Lynch, how I wished I could root them from cuttings. He asked if I had ever made the cuttings at a butter-soft stage. Of course, I had not. He told me to try that, which I did, with good results. A few years ago, I started propagating native stewartia from cuttings, also with good results. The following article explains the procedures I use for each.

**Native azaleas.** As we know, some azalea varieties can leaf out sooner than others, and I am able to get cuttings from some as early as late April. When I go to make cuttings, I take along a bucket of water, Ziploc bags, a marking pen and an ice chest. It does not matter how tender the cuttings are; they can be bent like a vine.

I take cuttings approximately 3 inches long and drop them in the bucket of water. They cannot wilt. When the bucket is full of cuttings, I lift them out, shake off the excess water, put them in Ziploc bags, label them and place the bags in the ice chest. I usually do this later in the evening because that is when I have the time. I put the bags in the refrigerator until the next morning.

I then recut the bottom tips of the cuttings before I stick them in a 36-cell tray, using fine pine bark as the medium. I do not add anything to the bark, and I use no hormone on the tender cuttings. The cuttings are too soft to stick in the medium.

A deciduous azalea cutting is shown at the butter-soft stage. Some azalea varieties can leaf out sooner than others, and the author is able to get cuttings from some as early as late April.



This cutting was taken from the current year's growth. The stem is cut, dividing it between softwood cutting and butter-soft cutting.



Margie Y. Jenkins is owner/manager of Jenkins Farm and Nursery LLC, a medium-sized, wholesale nursery located in southeast Louisiana that specializes in growing plants in the field, as well as in containers.



The butter-soft section of the cutting is carefully inserted into the root media, which should not be dry. A pencil or stick may be needed to open a space in the media for the cutting to be inserted.



The author, holding a 1-year-old *Stewartia*, found success finding *Stewartia* cuttings on Weyerhaeuser Co. property near the Bogue Chitto River.

Therefore, you have to make a hole to place the cutting in, and then pinch the bark around the base of the cutting. Next, I place the trays under mist. As soon as the cuttings have a substantial root system, I place them in a shade house and

feed them with a liquid fertilizer, such as Miracle-Gro. I try to water them with this mix once a week. Keep the cuttings adequately watered because the cells dry out very quickly.

There are many articles and publica-

tions about rooting native azaleas that say not to disturb the root system until the next spring, after the cuttings have put out new growth. This is very important, as I lost many cuttings by shifting them into pots in the winter. They did not releaf. However, I have shifted some of the cuttings that I rooted very early using a recommended mix for evergreen azaleas and have had good results. The evergreen azalea mix is made of pine bark. For each yard, I add 10 to 12 pounds of Osmocote 17-7-12, 1% pounds of Micromax micronutrients and 4 pounds of dolomitic limestone. The cells of cuttings that were full of roots were transplanted into 4-inch pots. They did break growth before going dormant in the fall and releafed in the spring.

Native *Stewartia*. The scarcity of cutting material has made native *Stewartia* production very difficult. I have never found one on our property. Four years ago, I was visiting a friend in mid-May who had a *Stewartia malacondendron* in his garden that he collected in the wild from his own property. He gave me approximately 10 cuttings, and I think all of them rooted. I used the new, slightly firm growth that had come on that spring, with fine pine bark as a medium with no additives. I also did not use any rooting hormone. The cuttings were placed under mist.

The next spring, I learned of a lady who lived on the Bogue Chitto River, which is approximately 15 miles from our nursery.

## Steps to rooting native azaleas and stewartia

### Native azaleas

- Take butter-soft cuttings in early spring (I like to take my cuttings in late April and into May depending on development of new growth).
- Drop cuttings in water to keep them from wilting.
- Transfer cuttings after a few minutes into plastic bags.
- Keep refrigerated until time to stick.
- Do not use any rooting hormone, and do not add anything to rooting media.
- Place under mist until rooted.
- After rooting, move trays to a shade house, and be sure to keep cuttings well-watered because the cells dry out very quickly.
- Feed with a liquid fertilizer once a week.
- Shift to a larger container in spring after new growth has put out.

### Stewartia malacondendron

- Take cuttings from new growth approximately 6 inches long using no hormone (I find the middle of May to be the best time to take cuttings).
- For woody growth, treat with a No. 1 hormone powder.
- Stick cuttings in rooting media with no additional additives.
- Place under mist until rooted.
- After rooting, move trays to a shade house, and feed with a liquid fertilizer in order for cuttings to break growth.
- Be sure to keep cuttings well-watered because the cells dry out very quickly.
- Shift to a larger container in spring after new growth has put out.



For woody stewartia cuttings, the author uses a No. 1 hormone powder. She then sticks the cuttings in rooting media with no additional additives.

She had collected several plants in the wild from her property and had them growing in her garden. She was very generous with her cutting material. Two years ago, I was able to go onto Weyerhaeuser Co. property on the Bogue Chitto River for cuttings. I was amazed there were so many stewartia. From there, I took longer branches and used all of the new wood for cuttings. I used no hormone on the end cuttings, which I made approximately 6 inches long. On the more woody cuttings, I used No. 1 hormone powder. It is important to move these plants from under the mist to a shade house as soon as they root and start feeding them with a liquid fertilizer. Also, keep them adequately watered.

I believe that getting these plants to break new growth will enable them to leaf out in the spring. Over winter, I leave them in the shade house and cover it with plastic. I do not have every plant releaf in the spring, but most do. Once the plants have leafed out, I transfer them to a 1-gallon container using the same soil mix as I do with evergreen azaleas. They grow off fairly quickly.

I have learned that native plants grown from seed and cuttings collected from the local area grow off better with more vigor than those from a distant area.

*Margie Y. Jenkins is owner/manager of Jenkins Farm and Nursery LLC, Amite, LA.*