Rooting Stewartia and Native Azaleas Using Softwood Cuttings©

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INTRODUCTION

Jenkins Farm and Nursery, L.L.C. is a medium-sized wholesale nursery located in southeast Louisiana that produces both field- and container-grown plants. In the beginning of the container operation in the mid-1970s, a goal of our nursery was to grow native, old unavailable, new and unusual plant taxa for the landscape trade. Liners of most of these were very hard to come by, if not impossible. Hence, it was up to the nursery to propagate them from seeds and cuttings.

My first experience of growing native azaleas from seed was in l969, and I have been growing them ever since. I tried rooting azaleas from cuttings with practically no success. I read everything I could get my hands on, tried what was recommended and had about the same results. Many years ago, our local Azalea Society Chapter members made a trip to the Gloster Aboretum in Mississippi in the spring when the native azaleas were in full bloom. That day I remarked to my friend, 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 (softwood cuttings). Of course, I had not. He told me to try it, which I did. Later I will discuss the procedure I use. A few years ago I started propagating the native *Stewartia* from cuttings with good results. The following is the procedure I used for each.

STEWARTIA

The production of our native *Stewartia* has been very difficult, due to the scarcity of cutting material. Four years ago, I was visiting a friend who had a *S. malacodendron* in his garden that he collected in the wild from his own property. This was in the middle of May. He gave me about ten 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 did not use any rooting hormone. The cuttings were placed under mist.

The next spring I learned of a lady who lived on Bogue Chitto River, which is about 15 miles from our nursery. 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. I have brought two of these plants for the plant auction. Two years ago, I was able to go onto Weyerhaeuser Company property on Bogue Chitto River for cuttings. I was amazed there were so many. From there I took longer branches and used all of the new wood for cuttings. I used no rooting hormone on the cuttings which were about 15 cm (6 in.) long. With the more woody cuttings, I use the #1 hormone powder. When the cuttings have a substantial root system, it is important to remove them from under the mist and place in a shade house. Start fertilizing them with a liquid-fertilizer, such as Miracle Gro® and keep well watered. I feel that getting the plants to break new growth will enable them to leaf-out in the spring. Over the winter I leave them in the shade house, which is covered with plastic. I do not get them all to re-leaf in the spring, but the majority does. Once they have

leafed-out in the spring, I transfer them to 3.75-L (1-gal) containers using the same soil mix as I do with evergreen azaleas. They grow-off fairly quickly.

NATIVE AZALEAS

Some taxa of native azaleas leaf-out much sooner. I am able to take cuttings from some as soon as late April. When I make cuttings, I take a bucket of water, zip lock bags, 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 which are around 8 cm (3 in.) long and drop them in the bucket of water. They can not be allowed to wilt. When the bucket is full of cuttings, I lift them out, shake off excess water, put into a Zip Lock® bag, label, and place in the ice chest. I usually do this late in the evening, because that is when I have the time. I put the bags into the refrigerator until the next morning. I re-cut the bottom tip 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. Therefore, you have to make a hole to place the cutting in and then pinch the bark around the base of the cutting. I place the trays under mist. As soon as the cuttings have a substantial root system, I place them in a shade house and fertilize them with a liquid-feed, such as Miracle Gro. I try to fertigate them with this mix once a week. The cuttings need to be adequately watered, since the cells dry out very quickly. Everything you read about rooting the native azaleas will tell you not to disturb the root system until the next spring — after they have put out new growth. This is very important, since I have lost many rooted liners by shifting them into pots in the winter. They did not re-leaf. However, I have shifted some of the ones that I rooted very early, using the mix that I use for evergreen azaleas, with good results. By July, the cells of cuttings are full of roots. After transferring the cells to a 10-cm (4-in.) pot, they will break growth before going dormant in the fall and re-leaf in the spring. I have found that this procedure works well for most native azaleas.

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