

Horticultural Improvement of the Native Azalea, *Rhododendron tosaense*

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INTRODUCTION

Japan has many native azaleas scattered throughout the country, and people have appreciated their beautiful flowers since ancient times. In the Edo era, people were especially keen about horticultural plants, such as azalea, chrysanthemum, camellia, primrose, hydrangea, gardenia, dianthus, flowering cherry, mume, willow, etc. With regard to azaleas, several groups, such as Kurume, Satsuki, Hirado, and Miyama, were developed from the native species on Kyushu Island. They were taken to western countries and bred to produce many horticultural evergreen azaleas, such as Belgian forcing azalea, Glendale, etc.

I would like to introduce one promising native azalea, *Rhododendron tosaense*, 'Fuji-Tsutsuji' (meaning mauve-coloured azalea) from Shikoku Island.

THE HORTICULTURAL MERITS OF *RHODODENDRON TOSAENSE*

- Very slender and soft twigs.
- Medium-sized flowers of mauve to lavender colour.
- Very early spring flowering, with a mass of blossom covering the entire plant.
- Forcing ability is very high, and equal to that of Kurume azaleas. To save energy, heavy shading during summer promotes pre-Christmas flowering in an unheated glasshouse.
- Rapid growth from seed to maturity in 1 year.

RESULTS OF SURVEY

- Many of the wild populations have disappeared recently owing to the rapid growth of the urban area of Ehime Prefecture. Genetic conservation is now urgently needed to prevent the extinction of this native azalea.
- A new population was discovered growing on the recently cleared slopes near paddy fields and along a newly constructed road. This demonstrates the pioneering habit of this species.
- Two distinct flower sizes have been observed in the wild. The northern population has a rather large flower, and the southern population in Ehime Pref. has a smaller one. A larger flowered type would be the aim of a breeding programme.
- Several colour variants have been collected. They are temporarily named as "Violet", "Purple", "Apricot", "Cherry", "Snow" and "Mauve" and have been transferred to the cutting-propagation programme.