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Features

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A Bicolor Beauty

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The Encore Azalea line of plants has been a mainstay in American gardens for more than three decades. Since Plant Development Services Inc. Director of Plant Innovation and Encore Azalea Founder Robert “Buddy” Lee first introduced it in 1995, the line has since seen more than 35 additions, including the one we’re highlighting in this issue: Autumn Kiss.

I asked Buddy what this new introduction adds to the line and he said he’s been watching this one for a long time.

“It came out of several generations of controlled crosses, where I was working to bring together not just a unique bloom, but a plant that performs when it counts,” he added. “The flowers have a soft pink center with a hot pink ruffled edge and the blend of those colors puts on a spectacular show, especially in spring when it produces the largest flush of flowers.”

Like the rest of the Encore series, it’s not done in spring, as it’s a repeat bloomer and a tough plant with excellent cold tolerance.

“But what makes Autumn Kiss so special within the lineup goes beyond that signature bloom. It’s a mid-dwarf variety with a tidy, mounding habit and it’s got a vigorous root system that lets it establish quickly in the landscape,” Buddy said. “From a grower and retailer standpoint, it’s the kind of azalea that catches your eye on the bench, but more importantly, it holds up and performs in the garden.”

> **Autumn Kiss Encore Azalea**
> **USDA Zones: 6a to 10b**
> **Height & Spread: 3 to 4 ft.**
> **Bloom Span: 3-in. across**
> **Exposure: Light Shade to Full Sun**
> **Consumer Website: encoreazalea.com**

Buddy said this one took about 10 years from pollination of parent plants to the actual product release—a timeframe not uncommon for many flowering shrubs.

“Azalea breeding can be a long game, however, I enjoy the entire process,” he added. “Bicolor blooms present a bit more of a challenge because they take a little longer to evaluate to ensure that the flower continues to bloom with a bicolor pattern. We also need to ensure that the entirety of the plant—including the root system, leaves, branching and growth habit—is desirable and will provide the consumer with a healthy, attractive plant for years to come.”

That hard work and dedication has paid off, and he often hears from home gardeners who enjoy their Encores.

“I do a good bit of traveling and it’s always such a rewarding moment when I meet someone new who tells me that Encore Azaleas are growing in their yard. It’s a point of pride for me,” he said. “In recent years, I’ve gotten many positive comments about our newer Encore Azaleas, in particular regarding the spectacular new colors. But our older released varieties continue to receive praise for their outstanding performance, which I always love to hear.”

I asked him how he’s seen successful retailers promote the Encore Azalea lineup and he said when they’re in a reblooming period they’re natural attention-grabbers by showing off their color, and it’s often effective to group them by color or offer up a “store within a store” reinforced with the point-of-purchase materials and tags that are available to retailers. Highlighting their benefits—from use as hedges, mass plantings and even in larger containers—helps to show customers what to do with them, too.

He added that retailers have been successful by showcasing them on social media pages.

“Encore Azaleas are true ‘scroll stoppers’ with those iconic blooms,” he noted. “When a bench is covered in flowers, that kind of color and fullness gets attention right away, whether it’s in a photo, a reel or a short garden center video. It’s one of the most effective ways to show customers just how dramatic they can be.”

Don’t forget, too, that National Garden Bureau (NGB) has named 2026 the Year of the Azalea (with marketing material available at ngb.org), and Buddy said retailers can leverage that to promote Autumn Kiss and the other Encore Azaleas. Also, Autumn Kiss was named an NGB People’s Choice Green Thumb Award Winner this year, which means consumers chose it over other competing shrubs. Finally, April was named National Azalea Month by the Azalea Society of America. There’s no shortage of opportunities to talk about how great these plants are for home gardeners.

“The variety is perfectly positioned to ride that wave of excitement, and as an Encore Azalea, it’ll grab attention on the shelves with its spring, summer and fall blooms,” Buddy said. **GP**

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