



In 2022, when you don't know something, what do you do? Ask Google. So, I did: "Why is an azalea's bloom so fleeting?" Google didn't have a good answer for me.

I reworked my query, again and again. Google offered me solutions to problems I don't have: "What You Can Put on Your Azaleas to Make Sure They Bloom," "6 Possible Reasons Your Azaleas Aren't Blooming," "To Prune or Not to Prune: That Is the Question." But it wasn't the question. The question was, rephrased: Why do flowers fade so fast?

The truth is unsatisfyingly simple: Because they can.

Why does a bush or shrub sprout bursts of magenta, bumblebee, indigo or Chantilly lace? Because it needs a date. Plants flower to perpetuate their own existence. It's their way of attracting pollinators, and pollinators facilitate seed-production, which fosters a new generation, and so on, year after year (or by another interval, depending on the species of plant).

Some plants flower with such abandon that it seems as if their only purpose is to fill the world with color. That's a conundrum associated with point-of-view: To us, the spectacle is dazzling, defying the limits of simple description, tonic for a winter-weary soul. To the flower itself, it's a fortnight's frenetic bid for survival. To an insect, it's party time.

The Bible and secular authors throughout history employ flowers as metaphor for human growth and development, and fragility of the human condition, and hope. In the Middle East lands chronicled in ancient texts, the annual springtime display of wildflowers is glorious for a few short weeks, then followed by relative desolation. Brilliant colors fade into masses of withered leaves – not uncommonly cleared by burning – that eventually blow away, leaving bare, baked earth where life once thrived.

Per Job: "Mortals...spring up like flowers and wither away; like fleeting shadows, they do not endure." That's depressing. But, perhaps not. The flower fades, but not its impact on the land. It exists so that its host can live on. In a way, its legacy is eternal.

Arguably, Jesus' most famous oratory is The Sermon on the Mount. There, he urges his audience to reject feelings of anxiety. According to the Gospel of Luke, He said, "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin." He challenged those gathered near him to look beyond the surface appeal of the blooming plants in view. The flower, though beautiful, was frail and fleet-

ing. It sprung from a bulb, dormant through winter. It forced its way through the earth to appear in its most attention-grabbing state for a very short time. Its splendor is temporary, but its enduring core – the bulb – remains.

A flower blooms year after year. So does a human life. It spans periods of abundance and need, both materially and spiritually. But eventually, the bulb faithfully produces more flowers; it's only a matter of time.

Renewal is the cousin of hope. So as flowers often symbolize growth, so do they remind us of possibility. Said Henri Matisse, "There are always flowers for those who choose to see them." This one from poet Erin Hanson is especially nice: "She sprouted love like flowers, grew a garden in her mind, and even on the darkest days, from her smile the sun still shined."

Flowers as cautionary tale: "Don't forget to stop and smell the roses." Or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson said more elegantly, "Many eyes go through the meadow, but few see the flowers in it." Amidst the noise and chaos, simple joy is available, if you choose it.

So why, then, is the azalea bloom inclined to fade so fast? Maybe the answer is best articulated in Japanese philosophy. Sakura flowers, or cherry blossoms, are widely adored in Japan. "Hanami" is a still-practiced ancient custom, centered on gathering with others to view trees and flowers in bloom. Sure, cherry blossoms are mind-blowingly pretty; yet they are more than aesthetic gifts to the Japanese. Soon after sakura flowers have fully developed, the wind begins to blow them away. Sitting under a sakura tree reminds a person of the fleeting nature of beauty and life itself. Sakuran philosophy leverages the allegory of the cherry blossoms to encourage acceptance of the natural progression and nature of things. The bloom itself is both uplifting and a little sad.

Accepting our own transience can yield personal peace. In other words, and this might be my favorite (it's unattributed): "Spring is a lovely reminder of how beautiful change can be."

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