



Azalea Care

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Azaleas delight us with a profusion of blooms, in a wide range of colors, flower size and form. Most flower in spring to summer, although some bloom primarily in fall. Each plant blooms for about two weeks starting anywhere from April to July, depending on the variety. There are both evergreen and deciduous types, and they include species and cultivars that may be anywhere from one foot to more than ten feet tall. Gardeners in the eastern half of the continental United States and most of the Pacific Coast can select from a tremendous array of species and hybrids to find those that are adaptable to their climatic region, as well as the needs and requirements of the landscape site.

Azaleas are at their best when grown in moderately moist, well-drained, acid soil, with abundant organic material. They require some shade and good air circulation. Some protection is needed, especially immediately after transplantation and throughout the following year. With proper care, azaleas can bring a great deal of pleasure to the viewer.

When to Plant: Spring and fall are the best time to plant azaleas in most areas. In colder climates, this may be done in summer, and in very warm areas, winter works well.

Site Selection: Choose a partly shaded site that is not exposed to heavy winds. A gentle slope offers both enhanced drainage and a better view. Avoid locations near shallow-rooted trees, such as Silver Maples, whose roots compete for moisture and nutrients. Planting near concrete foundations and sidewalks can be problematic as the pH in the area is often too high for azaleas.

Zone: Select plants that are adapted to your plant hardiness zone. In the D.C. Metropolitan area, we are in zone 7a.

Light Requirement: Filtered sunlight to high part shade, as is found in a woodland setting, is best. Avoid the extremes of full shade and full sun. Morning sun can be beneficial in cooler regions and more shade may be acceptable in hotter area. The more light that is available, the more compact the plant will be.

Soil: Loose, crumbly, humus-rich, moisture-retentive, well-drained soil is ideal. Heavy clay and sandy types require the addition of copious amounts of organic material, such as compost, decayed leaves and/or milled pine bark, to achieve this state.

pH: Azaleas will thrive in acid soil within a range of 4.5-6.0. In Virginia, Soil Test Kits are available at county libraries. For a small fee, these will be analyzed by the Virginia Cooperative Extension. Results include not only pH, but also many soil nutrients. Do NOT use lime, unless the soil pH is below 3.0. A soil analysis is the best way to determine if there are nutritional disorders.

Preparing Container Grown Azaleas for Planting: If the roots of the azalea are pot-bound (roots dense, matted, and/or circling at the interface of soil and pot), break into the root ball, every few inches, both down the sides and across the bottom, with a narrow, blunt instrument (e.g. an old screwdriver) so that approximately 1" of roots are exposed.

Planting Azalea: Prepare a hole about 8" deep and three times as wide as the plant's root ball. Add organic material at the rate of one-third to one-half by volume to the removed soil and mix thoroughly. Firm the base of the planting hole. Add enough of the mixture back to the hole so that

the root ball will be at the proper depth. Mound the amended soil up to the edge of the root ball. Create a berm about 2 feet from the stem to form a saucer that will capture water. When planting in multiples, prepare the entire bed.

Planting Depth: In good garden soil, situate the plant so that the top of the root ball is about 2" above the existing soil. For heavy clay, the planting hole should be made wider and the root ball positioned about 4" out of the hole. In sandy soils, the top of the root ball should be even with the surrounding soil.

Planting in Poorly Drained Areas: Good drainage is essential to success. If a poorly drained site can not be corrected, create a planting bed at least 8" deep on top of the existing soil.

Spacing: Ideally, azaleas should be spaced to allow for their mature width. Height and width are typically stated for a plant at 10 years old. Plants continue to grow for many years beyond this. To achieve a fuller look while they are still young, plant more azaleas in between the permanent ones and transplant the temporary ones when they have gained some size.

Water: Immediately after planting, water thoroughly. For at least the first year or two after planting, azaleas will need about an inch of water each week from a combination of rain and irrigation. Do NOT let the root ball become completely dry. A long, deep soaking will allow water to reach the bottom of the root ball and, therefore, is much more effective than frequent, short waterings. Make certain plants are well hydrated before going into winter dormancy.

Mulch: After watering, apply a 3" layer of coarse, loose, porous organic material, such as shredded bark. Subsequently, reapply the mulch to maintain the same depth after the ground has frozen. Keep the mulch 2" away from the stem.

Nutrition: Do NOT apply any chemical fertilizers at planting time. Azaleas have low nutritional needs compared to other plants. A soil high in organic matter and properly mulched provides substantial nutrients for azaleas. Compost is beneficial as a soil amendment or top dressing. Avoid chemical fertilizers which can be detrimental to azaleas. Organic products are available. Applications should be made in early spring to early summer. Do NOT fertilize after mid July.

Weeding: Pull weeds by hand. Do not cultivate around the azalea root area with tools, as their roots are shallow.

Pruning: Azaleas adapt well to pruning. Small azaleas should be tip pruned frequently during the growing season to encourage compact growth. When shaping larger specimens, do not remove more than one-third of the volume. Prune after blooming. Do NOT prune after mid July.

Notes: Do not walk on the area around the azaleas.

