

Almost Eden Azalea Growing Guide



The evergreen azaleas bring a burst of color to the spring garden and are especially well-suited to the climate of the humid southeastern US. You can find the old Formosa or Indica types long abandoned on old home sites and in cemeteries doing just fine with little or no care. With cultivars that range in size from 10-12' at maturity to a diminutive 1-2' like the Gumpos and Chinsei (both of which make good bonsai specimens) there is an azalea to fit in almost any garden. Colors can range from brilliant red, pink, white, purple and even orange as well as variegated forms that display stripes, flecks, and picotees. For true yellows and golds you'll have to look to the deciduous types and the rhododendrons. Flowering generally peaks in spring but some varieties like Watchet, Fashion, and Red Ruffles are known to flower in fall as well as spring. With the advent of the Encore® azaleas we can now have azaleas in flower from spring to frost it seems! Thank you Buddy Lee! With proper growing conditions these naturally mounding, hardy, evergreen shrubs will need little care once well-established.

Azaleas have a very fine, fibrous root system and will do best in a moderately moist, well-drained, acid soil (pH range 4.5-5.5) that is rich in well-composted organic matter. The soil should be loose and friable. Another important thing to keep in mind is that azaleas seem to do best where they are in a symbiotic relationship with beneficial mycorrhizal fungi. Adding extra amounts of organic matter like composted leaves, well composted pine-bark, or peat moss (including peat moss based potting soils) as well as a generous, breathable, organic mulch seems to produce the best results. Clay soils will have to be thoroughly amended with generous amounts of sand and organic matter and even then you can create a clay bowl that just holds water. Where drainage is a concern consider planting them in well-prepared raised beds.

The acid loving nature of azaleas makes them poor choices where concrete and mortar can leach lime into the soil. This is often most evident where they are used in commercial landscapes. Another source of lime is garden fertilizer like 8-8-8 and 13-13-13. A 50 lb. bag of 8-8-8 from a local feed store contains a total of 12 lbs. of N-P-K and 38 lbs. of dolomitic lime as filler. A proper organic mulch can provide them with practically everything that they need in terms of nutrients. If you think your soil is too poor, we suggest fertilizing with cottonseed meal. I've heard old experienced gardeners say that you should "turn the ground green with it" beneath your Camellias and blueberries every spring. If you are determined that more is necessary than you have provided be sure to use a fertilizer labeled for acid loving plants and use it as directed. Blood meal can also be used but most sources suggest avoiding bone meal due to the fact that it may increase the pH. We generally apply fertilizer to the outer 2/3's of the root zone beneath the shrub's canopy as this is where the feeder roots are.



It's no wonder that so many experts laud organic mulches when growing plants with all of its wonderful benefits. Properly applied mulches will help to keep weeding to a minimum. Watering is reduced partly due to the fact that the soil's surface is in the shade and so reduces evaporation. Its very presence helps to trap moisture in the root zone. As organic mulches breakdown they provide nutrients for soil microbes, which in turn release the nutrients back to the soil as well as keeping the soil loose and friable. The organic matter is food for the mycorrhizal fungi which share nutrients and moisture with many members of the Blueberry family including azaleas and other Rhododendron species. You are trying to create an ecosystem and the only real maintenance that is necessary is to pile the leaves you rake up in the fall around them. Under good conditions, well-established azaleas can go through summer with minimal or no additional water and nothing more than a good mulch. Not only does mulch provide your back relief from pulling weeds, hoes, and hoses it provides the perfect environment for the predators of nematodes, it looks natural, is aesthetically pleasing, is sustainable,

provides a place to put all of those leaves each year, saves on fertilizer and pesticide purchases and the labor and equipment to safely apply them.



Pine tree shade, light shade, morning sun, and filtered shade are generally all good conditions for azaleas. Pine tree shade seems to fit them perfectly, as does the east side of a house or building. The north side can sometimes be too dark for them to grow full and lush and may reduce flowering. In the northern portions of their range the north side may not be preferential anyway as stems and buds can freeze with extended temperatures in the mid 20°F's. 10°F is considered the minimum for many of the velvety leaved, evergreen azaleas like the Formosa's, Gumpos, and Satsukis. The deciduous types as well as the large, waxy leaved Rhododendrons can take somewhat colder temperatures often extending the range of Rhododendrons into zone 4 (-30°F). Fertilizing too late in the year, it's generally mid-August for us, can cause tender growth that could be susceptible to an early freeze or hard frost and so may actually do more harm than good.

Once you have chosen your desired planting area you'll want to begin soil preparation. Take a long look at your existing soil to determine what amendments may be required and have them on hand at planting time. We generally like to dig an 18-24" wide by 8-12" deep hole, this sounds big but remember soil preparation is key and if you get it right you should never have to do much more than add mulch periodically for the life of your azaleas. If you hit clay stop digging downward and plan to build up the surrounding area with a good quality soil mix. The bottom of the planting hole should be firm and flat to match the bottom of the azalea's rootball. Thoroughly mix the necessary amendments with the native top soil. Composted organic matter can be added at a 1:1 ratio with the native top soil. It is important that azaleas are planted at the same exact depth that were grown in their containers. The surface of the root ball should be even with the surrounding soil once the soil has settled after a series of very thorough waterings. The only thing to go on top of the root ball should be mulch, never pile soil on top of the root ball. Azaleas that are planted too deep (have soil piled on top of the root ball) have a strong tendency to go into decline. If you feel that too many surface roots are exposed you may be able to get away with applying a very thin covering of well composted organic matter.

Watering after planting will be key to helping your new plants to get established. John always says "Water three times!" and my brothers would say "water them until you think that they are going to float back out!". They typically do not float back out of course but the idea is to water them deeply and thoroughly as this will: A.) settle the soil around the root ball giving it good contact with the surrounding soil; B.) help to remove any large air pockets in the soil, air generally kills or prunes roots; C.) provide the plant with sufficient moisture to thoroughly moisten the root ball to help it begin to get established; D.) watering deeply and thoroughly will also help to teach the roots to grow deeper after water instead of creeping to the surface soils which dry out first. By watering thoroughly each time your watering frequency can be reduced. Your actual frequency will vary with your soil type. One way to test if it is time to water is to stick your finger in the soil of the root ball to a depth of about 1", if it is moist and cool then no water is needed yet but if the soil feels dry and is at air temperature then it is time to water. In general azaleas will need 1-2" of rain per week or the equivalent thereof particularly during the first few years of establishment but remember not to keep them soggy.



Azaleas can be successfully planted any time of year. With that said fall is the optimal planting time for woody trees, shrubs, vines, and hardy perennials. In areas where the soil does not freeze in winter plant root systems will continue to grow all winter helping them to get established before the stress of summer hits. In much of the southeastern US, fall and winter rains are generally sufficient enough that watering may not be required again until summer.

For the spring flowering azaleas pruning is generally best done as soon as flowering is finished in the spring as these develop their buds in July and August. For the repeat flowering and fall flowering types you'll want to be done with pruning by early June. If you are not concerned about next season's flowers you can prune most any time before mid-August (here in 8B) although pruning in mid-summer when plants are under stress can

cause dieback. Azaleas can produce new growth anywhere along a stem and so can be pruned back hard periodically if renewal is needed. Shearing is acceptable but is not required if you understand that azaleas naturally grow with a layered effect and many of the stems will be near the same age and length. You can prune back a layer at a time, cutting the stems well below the foliage of the next layer to get them back into the height range you desire. Truly though it is preferred to plant an azalea that will fit your space even at full maturity. As LSU Agcenter says choose the “Right Plant for the Right Place”. In summer, a few vigorous stems may shoot above the canopy, a.k.a. water-sprouts, these can be removed at most any time.



In our area Azalea mealy bugs can be a concern. Where plants have minimal light, poor air circulation, are grown in compacted, poorly drained, or alkaline soils, have to deal with competition from weeds and grasses, or are otherwise stressed like with plants grown in full sun these tiny bugs can sense it. Some say this attraction could be due to a buildup of certain amino acids. Once the population of the Azalea mealy bugs rise they can cause the foliage to look speckled with light green to white. The lighter coloration is due to the fact that the nutrient rich portions have been emptied of their food value including the green chlorophyll. The contents are too rich in sugars for the insects to fully digest and so the excess is excreted and falls on to the foliage below where a black sooty mold may develop. This mold and the speckled to even nearly white foliage are good indicators of an infestation. As with many insects, azalea mealy bugs hide from predators living and reproducing on the undersides of the leaf surfaces and so this is where pesticides will need to be applied if you decide that treatment is required. Always use pesticides as they are labeled and in a safe manner. Repeated treatments with horticultural oil have been successful in controlling populations in home gardens.

*Thank You & Good Growing,
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Additional Resources

Azaleas – LSU Agcenter

<http://www.lsuagcenter.com/NR/rdonlyres/1C072015-9DEB-4B77-8606-1CE852A48115/89565/pub1295azaleas.pdf>

Azaleas for the Landscape – MSU Cares / Mississippi State University Extension Service

<http://msucares.com/pubs/infosheets/is0656.pdf>

Selecting and Growing Azaleas – University of Georgia Extension

http://www.caes.uga.edu/publications/pubDetail.cfm?pk_id=7732

Azaleas at a Glance – University of Florida / IFAS Extension

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/mg019>

Growing Azaleas and Rhododendrons – Virginia Cooperative Extension

<http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-602/426-602.html>

Growing Azaleas and Rhododendrons – University of Missouri Extension

<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/g6825>