

Summer Azalea Maintenance Helps to Ensure a Colorful Spring

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This is the most stressful time of year for one of our most popular landscape shrubs. Azaleas have finished their spring growth flush. They will soon initiate flower buds which will continue to develop through late summer and fall.

"Next spring's azalea flowers depend largely on the health of the plants now," says Dan Mullins, UF-IFAS Extension Agent in Santa Rosa County. Plants grown under optimum light, nutrient, and moisture conditions during this critical period will probably flower their best next spring. On the other hand, plants undergoing stress now may not flower well next spring. In fact, they may not even be alive come next spring.

"Azaleas are plants with peculiar growing requirements," cautions Mullins. "Once these basic requirements are understood, they are easy to grow under Gulf Coast conditions."

Light: Partial shade or filtered light is ideal for azaleas. Good light conditions include shifting high shade from pines, as under story plants and areas that receive only morning sun.

Azaleas will not do well in areas that receive direct sunlight all day or when exposed to hot southern or western locations. Though they might live, they generally go into a "survival mode" rather than growing or flowering normally. Plants grown where there is too much heat and light are usually stunted, poorly foliated and covered with scaly lichens.

Soil Moisture: Being in the heath family, the root system of azaleas is somewhat unique. It is very shallow and fibrous, requiring both high oxygen levels and consistently moist, but not wet soil.

Periodic irrigation and the use of coarse organic mulches beneath plants help to meet these requirements. A 2 to 3 inch layer of pine needles or bark beneath plants retains moisture and allows roots to grow near the soil surface where oxygen is more abundant.

Fertilization: "Choose an Azalea * Camellia special type of fertilizer rather than a standard garden fertilizer," says Mullins. This specialty fertilizer contains no nitrate nitrogen, which is poisonous to the roots of azaleas. If you can understand the information on fertilizer labels and see that the fertilizer has no nitrate nitrogen, you can use other standard fertilizers such as 15-0-15.

Mullins adds, "Two fertilizer applications per year are usually sufficient. One is applied during the spring and a second in mid-summer. Follow label directions carefully and avoid

placing fertilizer on plant stems or leaves. Water immediately to activate the product and to prevent plant burn."

Pruning: Limit pruning at this time of year. Heavy general pruning done after early June results in reduced flowering the following spring. Excessively vigorous unsightly shoots, often called "water sprouts" can be removed any time that they occur.

Note: Mullins emphasizes, "Excessively deep planting continues to be the number one cause of azalea stunting and death in the landscape. Set new plants in the soil no deeper than the top of the root ball when transplanting."

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