



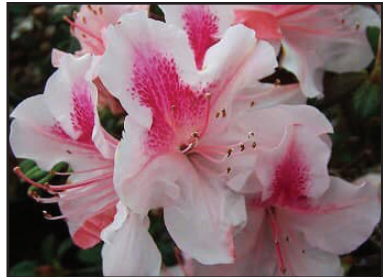
Gardening Uncovered: Azaleas

By Martha Vaughn

Now that the lights and décor are put away, we are all looking forward to the rebirth that comes with Spring. Hailed as the South's favorite shrub, the Azalea is a hallmark of Spring. In Central Florida, Azaleas are early bloomers and some varieties like the "Encores" will repeat all year.

When looking to add Azaleas to your garden, it is important to consider its mature size. Azaleas are open, sprawling growers and work great in informal landscapes. Their blooms come in a variety of pretty colors, so it is important to keep them in mind when choosing varieties. Also, keep in mind the flowering season.

Growing best in filtered light, the pine trees and sandy soil in Central Florida make it a great fit for Azaleas. Keep them out of densely shaded areas. Some varieties will take full sun.

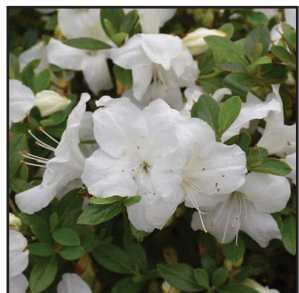


Azaleas prefer well-drained, organic soil and in Florida, that means we need to add components to the soil help increase water and nutrient retention. Fertilizer and organic materials such as peat, compost, or pine bark help lower the pH in the soil, you want the soil to be 5.0pH or less. Before making any soil adjustments, have it tested.

Tolerant to our heat, Azaleas do need to be watered. We recommend every 7-14 days during dry periods for mature and well-established shrubs. To make sure the azalea is getting enough water, we recommend wetting the soil between 14-18". The root systems of Azaleas are shallow, so it is important to make sure they don't get too dry.

A good rule of thumb is "Don't Prune Azaleas later than July 4th." Do wait until the current flowering is finished for the season. If you prune too late, you risk cutting off any of the early flower buds for next year. If you prune too early, it will also result in compact growth which can interfere with bud development. Pruning is necessary to develop a healthy Azalea.

There are several diseases that can affect Azaleas, so make sure to inspect them throughout the season. Common diseases are petal blight and leaf gall. Petal Blight starts out small, with either white or rust colored spots depending on the color bloom. Spots grow quickly into irregular blotches that destroy the bloom. Leaf Gall develops during Spring especially the wet months. Leaf Gall seems to develop most often on Azaleas who are in dense, shaded areas with poor air circulation. Appearing on stems, leaves or flowers, Gall can be picked off. Fungicides can be used as treatment. There are other declines that can affect Azaleas, so make sure to consult your local plant expert to learn the best treatments.



We know all about insects, lacebugs, white flies, leafminers, spider mites, scale and stem borers are the most common to attack Florida Azaleas. There are insecticides for each of these insects that needs to be applied at specific intervals. Make sure your expert plant care person shows you which to use.

If you are looking for an early bloomer that loves partial shade, then the Azalea is the shrub for you.

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