

Care and feeding of Azaleas

by Rose Ella Forsythe

When March arrives, most of us are ready for a change in the landscape. Azaleas are perfect to fill the bill. They offer a refreshing splash of color for winter-dulled senses.

Azaleas, called “The Royalty of Flowers” are of the *Rhododendron* family., a subspecies known as *Tsutsusi*, native to Japan. In East Texas and further east there is another subspecies called *Pentanthera*, the deciduous or wild native azalea. These are ly found in the acid soils of forests, although some nurseries have begun to stock them for sale. The *Pentanthera* azalea has a fragrance and a wider range of colors than the *Tsutsusi*.

Azaleas are not difficult to grow, even though they have earned the reputation as such. They fare better if a little planning goes into the planting. Azaleas should be planted in a semi shady spot, neither full sun nor dense shade. The filtered sun under pine trees is an ideal spot. Azaleas bloom more in bright light, and some varieties can stand more sun than others.

Planting azaleas in a raised bed helps them to thrive because they do not like “wet feet”. They should not be planted deeply. Spread out the root ball in a slightly indented spot in your prepared bed and pull the soil up over the root ball. Never plant lower in the ground than the plant has been placed in the pot. Water immediately after planting. Mulch the entire bed with pine straw, rotted pine bark or shredded oak leaves, about 1 inch deep around plant and 2-3 inches deep between the plants. If oak leaves are used, the mulch should be deeper. There are other mulches that can be used as long as they

decompose quickly. Mulching controls weed, holds in moisture and helps lower soil temperature.

After azaleas are established, they do not require as much water as when they are first planted. Azaleas should be watered during the drier part of the summer. A soaker hose placed in the bed when the azaleas are planted is ideal. Azaleas will start to look a little wilted when they are very thirsty, however they will wilt before the ground dries out completely, warning you to give them water.

Azaleas demand a slightly acidic soil and they will die in alkaline soil. The ideal pH 4 to 5.5. It is important to take a soil sample and have the pH tested. If it is too alkaline your soil pH can be lowered by adding ammonium sulphate (not aluminum sulphate) to the soil. Never scratch around roots of azaleas, because their shallow roots may be damaged. Decomposed mulch can also lower the pH in your soil. Another good reason to mulch!

After azaleas are established you may not need to fertilize heavily. I have found using water-soluble azalea fertilizer in a hose-end sprayer right after blooming works well. It gives them just enough “boot” to get through the summer. Do not fertilize later than July, because it will stimulate new growth that will freeze more easily. If leaves on your plants start to turn yellow give them a dose of chelated iron. Use your hose-end sprayer with the recommended amount of liquid and spray foliage. They will green up in no time. This is a temporary solution however, so you may need to work on your soil pH. Yellow leaves also indicate an alkaline soil.

Larger azalea plants may start to look leggy. If you choose, you may prune them. You should do the pruning directly after spring bloom and never after July 1. They set

buds for the next spring starting in July, and pruning later than this date will remove the next spring's bloom. If your plant needs a lot of pruning, it is best to do some this year and complete the pruning next spring. Too much cutting back may shock the plant.

Azalea pest are not numerous. There are a few, such as lacewing, spider mites, and some foliar feeders. These can be controlled with acephate (Orthene) or Malathion. Almost all diseases are fungus related and can be alleviated with a fungicide.

Azaleas are often planted in spring when they are blooming, but fall planting allows them to be established during the winter rains. Nurseries sometime have them on sale in the fall.

Give azaleas a little TLC and they will give you enjoyment of beauty for many years.