

Azaleas Are Spring Showoffs

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY Linda Steber

Azaleas are spring showoffs! Few shrubs in the landscape can rival azaleas for flower power when they are in full bloom.

The azalea is one of the most beautiful landscape plants for both foliage and flowers that is available here on the Gulf Coast. In the spring, it sports an incomparably spectacular mass of colorful flowers, and the rest of the year it serves as a lush foliage plant in the landscape. Surprisingly, it is an under-used plant in our area due to the misconception that it is a difficult plant to maintain.

Few shrubs in the landscape can rival azaleas for flower power when they are in full bloom. Although the floral

display may be relatively short with many of our traditional azaleas, such as the Indica azaleas, it ensures the continued popularity of this time-honored Southern shrub.

With the introduction and more common use of azaleas that bloom in other seasons, such as the increasingly popular Encore azaleas, it's not unusual to see azaleas blooming during the late summer, fall and winter.

Surprisingly, azaleas will grow and bloom in many different light intensities

all the way from filtered shade to bright sunny exposures. However, they will not bloom in deep shade. There is no secret formula to growing azaleas except for giving them proper care. This care means being careful in preparation of the planting bed, proper fertilization, pruning and special attention to water requirements.

Azaleas can certainly be planted in the spring. This is, of course, when garden centers have the best selection and is the time of



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the year that gardeners see azaleas in bloom. Spring-planted azaleas may take a little longer to become established than those planted in the fall or winter.

Fall and winter months would be the best time to plant. Fall and winter planting encourages root growth before spring bloom and shoot growth commence. Summer planting really should be avoided by most gardeners, although you can be successful planting at that time by providing extra care (primarily watering).

Before purchasing azaleas, make sure you ask what the mature size of the plants you intend to buy will be. Depending on the cultivar, azaleas may mature at less than 2 feet in height and to 10+ feet in height. Don't purchase a type of azalea that will grow too large for the spot where it will be planted. Large, mature azaleas like the Indicas require from 4-to-8 feet of space between each plant; smaller azaleas may be planted 2 feet apart.

Azaleas require good drainage but also need an even supply of moisture. They will not thrive in a location that is constantly wet or constantly dry. Uniformity in soil moisture is important for good azalea growth and establishment in a landscape setting.

If you find that a plant's outer roots are matted together when you take it out of its container, be sure to cut through the matted root layer with a sharp knife. This is a very important step to promote development of a vigorous root system after transplanting into the soil. It is also very important to never plant azaleas too deep! Set the plants into their planting holes so that the

top of the root ball is at the same level or slightly higher than the soil line of the planting bed.

After planting, water thoroughly and place 3-to-4 inches of mulch (such as shredded pine bark) around the plant. Mulching serves several purposes. In addition to conditioning the soil over the long-term, it also helps retain moisture and stifles the growth of weeds and grasses.

The first two years that the azalea is in the garden are the most critical for its survival. The young plant requires consistent soil moisture during this time when the feeder roots are developing and spreading. During dry spells, keep them well-watered but not soaking wet.

Azaleas should be fertilized with a fertilizer made especially for azaleas. There are many excellent commercially prepared brands on the market. Feed azaleas after all blooming has stopped in the spring, and repeat a few weeks later.

No other feeding should be done after May. Azaleas do best in soil that has a slightly acid pH. Acidifying the soil periodically with an iron-sulphur product may be required if the leaves turn yellow on the plant. Pruning can be done any time up until the flower buds start to form in midsummer. Pruning after bud formation commences will result in the absence of flowers in the spring. Plants can be safely pruned up to one-third or more of their height at one trimming. Azaleas should be kept trimmed to avoid legginess and to promote lush green foliage.

We live in a great climate for azaleas. If you do not believe it, drive around town and see the plants in

full bloom—there are some beauties.

At a Glance

WHAT: HONEY BEES AROUND THE GARDEN

WHEN: Tuesday, March 17, 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.

WHERE: Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office located at 4102-B Main (Carbide Park) in La Marque

SPEAKERS: Presented by Master Gardeners Stewart McAdoo and Robert Marshall

TOPICS: Presentation and discussion on the history, types, social life and hive structure of honey bees. Included in the program will be an overview of residential beekeeping.

