

Azaleas

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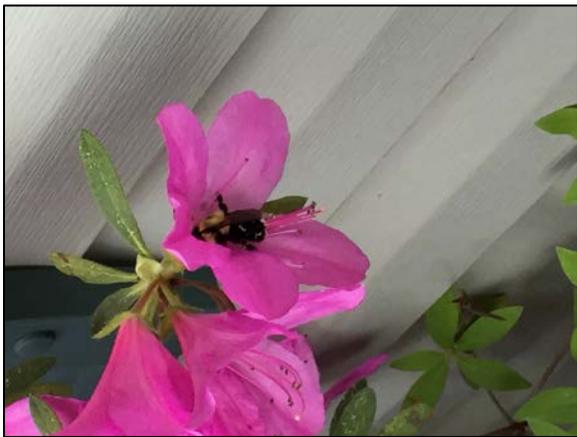
The spring when the azaleas and dogwoods are blooming is my second favorite time of the year, after college football season of course. When I lived out west in Texas and Oklahoma, I always watched the Masters golf tournament mostly to see the full, vivid azaleas that ringed some of the most demanding golf holes in the world. It always made me a little homesick. Now that I've been back in Georgia for the past 16 years, I get to watch this showy plant up close. I would like to share with you a few important facts about azaleas to help you grow your own or even to just appreciate the ones around us.

Azaleas are members of the Ericaceae family, which includes blueberries and mountain laurel and part of the Rhododendron genus. There are over 800 species and several hundred cultivars registered with the International Rhododendron Registry. Azaleas can be evergreen or deciduous and can be native or a cultivated variety. They can have single flowers, double flowers, or even hose-in-hose flower forms which come in different colors and even different shapes. And now they can bloom from early spring through October, depending on the variety.



The mature size of azaleas can vary as well, so care must be taken to plan where to put different plants. Tall plants should go to the background, while smaller plants should be forward. The colors should be harmonious rather than clash. Orange flowering azaleas often clash with pink or red flowering azaleas, so they probably should not be planted together. Also grouping azaleas of the same variety can make a more impressive color display than mixing different colors and cultivars together.

That means there is a lot to think about when deciding what type of azaleas to plant. The best time to shop for azaleas is when they are in bloom so you can see their flower colors and forms. Also, by purchasing plants in bloom, you will know they are true to type and not mislabeled.



Azaleas can be planted successfully any time of year, as long as they are watered during establishment. Fall planting is best because it is less stressful to the plant than spring and summer planting. During the fall, temperatures are cooler and plants are going dormant. As top growth decreases, there is less demand on the roots for water and nutrients. Roots continue to grow and become established throughout the fall and winter months, however, even when the top is dormant. By spring, the well-established roots are ready to support new growth and flowers.

Azaleas like moist, well-drained soil high in organic matter. They prefer filtered sun and work well as an understory planting near pine trees. Azaleas also prefer acidic soils between 4.5 and 6.0, which make them one of the few plants that prefer a more acidic site. Planting depth is critical, since azaleas are

shallow-rooted plants. The top of the root ball should be 1 – 4 inches above the surrounding soil grade. This allows for settling so the roots will remain in the upper layer of the soil. Mulching also works well for azaleas.

The best time to prune azaleas is after they bloom. Spring-flowering azaleas form their blossom buds for the next year during the summer, so avoid pruning them after July 1. Always prune, however, with a purpose in mind, not just because it is the time to prune. Some plants may need pruning to remove tall, lanky growth or vigorous suckers. It may be desirable to prune to maintain a more compact form. Sometimes it is necessary to prune old, over-grown plants to rejuvenate them or to reduce their size. Like many other broadleaf plants, healthy azaleas can be pruned to within 6 to 12 inches of ground level and will respond with an abundance of new shoots growing from the old wood.

Azaleas are also prone to cultural and environmental problems, such as leaf chlorosis or leaf scorch. Azalea lace bugs can be a major pest of azaleas, along with caterpillars, scale, southern red mite, and leafminers. And finally numerous diseases can affect azaleas, such as leaf galls, petal blight, Rhizoctonia web blight, and Phytophthora root rot. Many of the insects and diseases can be eliminated or reduced by proper cultural methods and environmental management.

I guess it's time to think about pruning my azaleas since they bloomed early and have stopped blooming already. This is just a small sampling of the information on azaleas and many other ornamental plants available from your local County Extension Office or by calling me at the Webster County Extension Office at 229-828-2325.