

Azaleas have eye-catching flower power

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



Azaleas are spring showoffs. 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.

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

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 certainly can be planted in the spring. This is the time of the year when garden centers have the best selection, and gardeners can see potted plants in bloom. Spring-planted azaleas might 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. De-

pending on the cultivar, azaleas might mature at less than 2 feet up to 10-plus feet. 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 can 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 also is very important to never plant azaleas too deep. Set the plants into their planting holes so 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 (shredded pine bark or pine needles) around the plant. Mulching serves several purposes. In addition to conditioning the soil, it also helps retain moisture and stifles the growth of weeds and grasses.



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Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit his website at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

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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 once soon after blooming has stopped in the spring, and repeat four to six weeks later. No other feeding should be done after May. Azaleas do best in soil that have a slightly acid pH. Acidifying the soil periodically with an iron-sulphur product might 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 mid-summer. Pruning after bud formation commences will reduce flower production in the following 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.

Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas AgriLife Extension Service, The Texas A&M System. Visit his Web site at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

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Upcoming Program

WHAT: 'H' is for 'ERB'

WHEN: 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. April 2

WHERE: Galveston County Extension Office, 5115 state Highway 3, in Dickinson

DETAILS: Master Gardener Anna Wygrys will present a PowerPoint presentation on growing herbs in Galveston County, including culture and care, how to use herbs in the landscape, and the culinary uses of herbs.

COST: \$10 registration fee (check or cash) accepted on the day of the program.

REGISTRATION: Call 281-534-3413, Ext. 1-20 or email [galv3\(at\)wt.net](mailto:galv3(at)wt.net)

