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Home Grounds, Gardens, Home Pests

Caring for your Azaleas

Azaleas are a staple plant for the southern landscape with many different varieties and types. The first southern hybrid azaleas were planted in Charleston, South Carolina in 1848. Today, azaleas can be found in each climatic region in the Eastern half of the United States and also in most of the Pacific Coast region. In this area of the south we have deciduous and evergreen varieties of azaleas. The native deciduous azaleas lose their leaves in the winter, but have very beautiful clusters of honeysuckle like flowers in early spring adding great flower texture to the landscape. More commonly seen in the landscapes are the evergreen azaleas that are available in many different varieties.

Site Selection

If you are thinking of adding azaleas to your landscape both the native deciduous and evergreen are great choices for areas with filtered shade. Very heavy shade throughout the day may reduce flower production and result in weak growth. Evergreen trees or tall shrubs with low branches make good windbreaks and attractive backgrounds for an azalea planting.

Azaleas do require some special treatment when it comes to soil conditions. Azaleas require an acid soil pH to grow properly. Check the soil pH of your site before you plant azaleas. A pH of 5.5 is good for most varieties of azaleas. The reason azaleas do better in slightly acid soil is because iron is more available. Iron in the soil may become unavailable to the plants if the pH gets too high.

Iron chlorosis is caused by not enough iron getting to the plant. The symptom of iron chlorosis is that the area between the veins is yellow or light green while the veins are darker green. In most Alabama situations the trouble usually is that the iron in the soil cannot be taken up by the plant because of the pH level being too high. Other causes of chlorosis symptoms in azaleas may also be attributed to poorly aerated soil, a heavy application of fertilizer, or roots that are heavily infested with nematodes or infected with root-rot disease organisms.

Fertilization

A big problem in azalea culture is over-fertilizing, especially with phosphorus. Too much fertilizer injures the plants and may even cause them to die. Be particularly careful with small plants. Use no more than 1 teaspoon of fertilizer at a time on plants less than 12 inches tall. For larger plants, use 1 heaping tablespoon per foot of height. Scatter the fertilizer under the plant on top of the mulch. It is better to make a light application after blooming and another in July than to apply the yearly recommendation all at one time.

The best way to avoid over-fertilizing your azaleas is to have your soil tested every 2 or 3 years and follow the recommendations. If you don't have a soil test, use an all-purpose fertilizer, such as 8-8-8 or 12-6-6. Some special azalea-camellia formulations are available and cater to the acid soil requirements of these plants.

Pruning

In Alabama many azaleas begin to set flower buds in July. Therefore, pruning after early July may reduce the next year's flower production. The best time to prune is soon after the flowering period in the spring, for our area, this should be done now before the new buds are set. Cut out the limbs that have grown out of the main body of the plant. Do not shear unless your intention is to create a formal hedge. Shearing destroys the natural form of the plant.

Azaleas often become too large for the area they occupy, especially when they are used as foundation plants around a home. If this happens, cut back the large plants to about 12 inches above the ground shortly after blooming. When new growth buds appear on the stem, the new stems and leaves will grow very fast. Pinch out any long unbranched shoots that develop to force more branching. Be sure to keep the soil moist for several days after severe pruning.

The Major Insect Pests

Spider mites are serious pests of many ornamentals such as roses, boxwoods, and azaleas. Adult spider mites vary in size and may be green, orange, red, brown, black, or a combination of these, but red is the most common. Young mites (nymphs) resemble adults except they are smaller and have only six legs.

Spider mites puncture the tissues of leaves and flowers with needle-like mouthparts and suck juices from the plant. This destroys the chlorophyll around the puncture, giving the leaves and flowers a speckled appearance. As mites multiply, entire leaves become discolored and distorted, and they may drop off. These pests are very small and feed mainly on the underside of leaves. They often go unnoticed until plant damage is obvious.

Azalea lace bugs are small insects with black bodies and colored or variegated, lace-like wings. They feed on the underside of leaves. The upper leaf surface opposite the feeding areas becomes speckled, and the leaf looks light or bleached and eventually turns brown. Lace bugs give off large amounts of a dark almost black, sticky substance on the underside of leaves. Black raised bumps on the lower surface of the leaves is an obvious symptom of this insect.



Chemical control gives best results when used in the spring to control the spider mites and the first and second generations of Azalea lace bug. Products such as; insecticidal soap, horticultural oil, neem oil, and most synthetic insecticides labeled for use on azaleas will provide control and often times multiple applications are necessary. For optimal coverage be sure to direct the spray to the undersides of the leaves. Using a recommended systemic insecticide drench in spring could prove to be a season long remedy. Always maintaining a healthy plant with sufficient water and nutrients and planting in a shadier area would be a good cultural practice to deter these damaging pest infestations.