

How to care for your acid-loving azalea

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At this time of year, do you look at the seas of pink and white blooms of azaleas and smile? I know I do. You know that spring is coming when the flowers start opening up and it was certainly early this year. Azaleas grow well in this area, but they do need some maintenance occasionally. This article will give you the highlights on how to best care for your azaleas.

Azaleas are extremely popular for their spectacular flower masses and color, form and various sizes, and evergreen foliage. We often see hybrid azaleas, but there also are some native azaleas. The Florida azalea, *Rhododendron austrinum*, is native to North Florida, but it is endangered. Planting more of these would be a good thing!

Azaleas do best in filtered sunlight. That is why we often see them under trees. Another benefit to being under oak or pine trees is that azaleas need acidic soil and the fallen leaves of those trees do that naturally.

Azaleas do best with a soil pH between 4.5 and 6.0. It is recommended to test your soil pH yearly to see if your pH is within that range. If your soil pH is too high, your azalea may develop iron or other micronutrient deficiencies which looks like yellowing between the veins of the leaves.

You can lower soil pH through the addition of peat moss, pine mulch, sulfur, or fertilizer. You can incorporate peat moss into the soil which will also increase the water-holding capacity of the soil or mulch the azaleas with pine straw.

Elemental sulfur can be applied to lower the pH, but too much can injure the plant roots. Don't apply more than 1 pound of sulfur per 100 square feet of plants at one time. It only lasts about 3 months, but I don't recommend applying it more than two to three times a year.

Since azaleas thrive with light applications of fertilizers, you should apply an acid-forming fertilizer (may say azalea fertilizer on the bag) like a 12-4-8 or 15-5-15 applied each season with approximately quarter-pound to a mature plant or three-quarters to 1½ pounds per 100 square feet.

Azaleas need adequate moisture especially during droughts. On the other hand, they don't like wet feet. If they are kept too wet, they can get root rot, caused by a fungus. They should be watered every 10-14 days during dry periods to wet the soil down 14-18 inches.

If you have a rain barrel, you can collect the water from your roof to water your azaleas during dry periods and save money. If you need a rain barrel, Alachua County Environmental Protection Department is selling some great rain barrels for \$75 until March 12 with pick-up on March 18. For more information, go to RainBarrelProgram.org/Alachua.

Lastly, azaleas often need yearly pruning. You should prune them after flowering but before July 4. Azaleas begin to set their buds in late summer, so you don't want to cut them off or you won't have flowers in early spring.

For magnificent flowers, you also want to put away the hedge clippers. Although shearing is fast, it only allows blooming on the outside of the plant which looks unnatural. Ideally, you should make staggered cuts throughout the inside of the plant with every third to fifth cut made more deeply. This will fill in the center with growth, producing flowers inside the plants as well and rejuvenate the plant.

If you create some holes in the plant, they will fill quickly. The bonus of this type of pruning is that you should only have to prune them once a year, so cut off enough in order for it to last.

If you need to rejuvenate overgrown plants, you can cut all the stems back knee high and then work with the growth that comes back. Not all the plants may survive severe pruning. The other method is to remove a third of the main stems and then stagger-cut the rest. This will gradually reduce the size over several years, but it is healthier for the plant.

Enjoy the blooms while we have them and follow this information to grow your azaleas confidently. For more information about growing azaleas, read Azaleas at a Glance, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/mg019>.