

Azalea Care & Pruning

Azaleas are one of the signature plants of Washington landscapes. They come in a myriad of colors and, depending on the varieties, bloom from late March through June. There are several that bloom both in spring and fall. Azaleas can be planted any time of the year, even when in full bloom. Spring and early fall are ideal times for planting. Summer is fine if you give extra care to watering.

LOCATION: Azaleas prefer a well-drained, organically rich, acidic soil. They will not thrive in wet areas. The ideal exposure is morning sun and afternoon shade. Some varieties can tolerate full sun, but their flowers will fade quicker and the foliage may be burned by the sun. Shelter azaleas from drying winds. The north, northeast, or east side of a building, a stand of evergreens, or filtered shade under tall trees can provide ideal conditions.

PROPER PLANTING: To ensure proper drainage, azaleas should be planted high, with 1/4 to 1/3 of the root ball above the existing ground level in a hole at least twice as wide as the root ball. Spacing will depend on the mature spread of the plants. If the azalea was in a pot, loosen the root system. Place the plant in the hole, backfilling with a mixture of 1/3 organic material, such as Bumper crop, to 2/3 original soil. Pack the soil firmly. Add a 2 to 3 inch layer of organic mulch around the plant, keeping it 3 to 6 inches away from the trunk. This will conserve moisture, maintain soil temperature, and discourage weeds. As the mulch breaks down, it will add nutrients to the soil and feed your azalea. Water thoroughly.

WATERING: For the first season, spring and summer watering should be done 2 to 3 times a week until fall, then once a day if the plants are small or the weather is hot. Always check the soil's moisture before watering - it should be lightly moist several inches down. In the following seasons, water azaleas about once a week when there has not been a good soaking rain. Plants will need more water in hot summers and while in bloom.

FERTILIZING: Azaleas do not require as much fertilizer as many other plants do. As the mulch decomposes, the humus provides adequate nutrients and promotes the presence of mycorrhizal fungi that bring soil nutrients to the roots. Any application of fertilizer should be based on your azalea's appearance, leaf color, growth rate, or soil test results. Use an acid type fertilizer according to package directions. Fertilizer should be applied when the soil is moist. Avoid fertilizing during the summer months.

PRUNING: Pruning is rarely necessary for azaleas, but if needed, should be done immediately after the plant blooms. Shaping your plant and thinning leggy branches back to the main trunk or another branch is usually all that is required. Prune small branches to allow light to penetrate the shrub, encouraging growth on interior branches. Cutting out dead branches may be done at any time of the year.

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