

Growing Azaleas

Sooner or later almost every Mississippi homeowner tries to grow azaleas. Azaleas are best suited to an informal garden that has partial shade. This can be a woodland area that receives filtered sunlight through deciduous trees (oaks and hickories) or through pine trees. In fact, azaleas do exceptionally well when planted in groups or masses in an area with a pine canopy. They grow well at the edge of heavily wooded areas or in partial shade such as that found on the north side of a house or hedge planting.

You can grow azaleas in full sun as facer plants along boundary and background plantings. The evergreen types are well-suited for foundation plantings. Some varieties respond to occasional pruning and can be an informal hedge or screen. Dwarf azaleas work fine for rock gardens or low shrub ground covers.

Colors and Flower Forms

Azalea flowers have a range of colors, including white, yellow, orange, scarlet, crimson, and purple, with many in-between colors and shades. There are vivid and sparkling shades, pastel tints, and pure whites. Some have striped or flecked flowers (petals).

The single flowers have five petals with from five to ten stamens. With some varieties, the flowers may be double or semidouble. Others may be the hose-in-hose type (funnel-formed), with the flower being narrow at the base and ending in a bell-shaped tube that is ruffled or smooth. Azaleas flower abundantly. If you choose the right varieties, they may flower for 2 months.

Types and Varieties

In Mississippi you may choose deciduous and evergreen types suited for outdoors. Two deciduous species grow natively in woodland areas of the state. *Azalea canescens*, or the pink bush honeysuckle, is common in south Mississippi, the hilly regions of central and north Mississippi, and in the flatwoods sections. The yellow bush honeysuckle, or *Azalea austrinum*, mostly grows only in the southeastern corner of the state. The pink and yellow flowers of these two species are single.

Cultivated Azaleas

Most of today's showy azaleas are hybrids. The four major groups of cultivated azaleas are Indicas, Kurumes, Glenn Dale hybrids, and the Satsukis and related hybrids. Varieties from the Indica and Kurume groups are grown more commonly throughout the state.

Culture

There are a few definite requirements to growing azaleas successfully. Always buy your plants from a reputable nurseryman or garden center. Buy plants with roots in a ball of soil properly protected or plants growing in containers. You can transplant some of the deciduous types as "bare root" plants. With this type, make sure the roots have been kept moist during the transplanting.

Some Common Azalea Varieties

Group/Name	Approximate Bloom Date	Flower Color	Approximate Height
<i>Indica</i>			
Fisher Pink	Midseason	Light pink	6 to 8 feet
President Clay	Early	Purplish red	6 to 8 feet
Brilliant	Early to midseason	Rose pink	3 to 4 feet
Formosa	Early to midseason	Rose lavender	6 to 12 feet
Pride of Mobile	Midseason	Watermelon pink	8 to 12 feet
George L. Taber	Midseason	White to pale pink	6 to 8 feet
Mrs. G. G. Gerbing	Early to midseason	White	6 to 8 feet
<i>Kurume</i>			
Christmas Cheer	Early to midseason	Brilliant red	2 to 3 feet
Hinodegiri	Midseason	Bright scarlet	3 to 4 feet
Coral Bells	Midseason	Shell pink	3 to 4 feet
Snow	Midseason	Pure white	1_ to 2 feet
Hexe	Midseason	Deep red	2 to 3 feet
Bridesmaid	Late	Deep salmon	4 to 5 feet
Hershey Red	Early	Bright red	3 to 4 feet
Hino Crimson	Early	Dark red	2 to 4 feet
Pink Pearl	Early	Soft pink with rose blotch	4 to 6 feet
<i>Satsuki</i>			
Amaghasa	Late	Orange to red	3 to 4 feet
Gumpo	Late	White, pink	1 to 3 feet
Flame Creeper	Late	Orange red	1 to 2 feet
Higasa	Late	Deep pink	1 to 3 feet
Myogi	Late	White with rose	1 to 3 feet
Rosaeflora	Very late	Deep salmon pink	1 to 2 feet
<i>Glenn Dale</i>			
Copperman	Midseason	Orange red	3 to 4 feet
Fashion	Midseason	Soft orange to rose	4 to 6 feet
Glacier	Midseason	White	4 to 6 feet
Trouper	Early	Orange red	4 to 6 feet
<i>R. mucronatum</i>			
Delaware Valley	Early	Pure white	4 to 6 feet
<i>Rutherford</i>			
Pink Ruffle	Midseason	Pink	4 to 6 feet
L. C. Fisher	Midseason	Clear salmon pink	4 to 6 feet
<i>Brooks</i>			
Red Ruffle	Early	Deep red	4 to 6 feet
Redwing	Early	Deep cerise red	2 to 4 feet

Some Common Azalea Diseases and Pests

Name	Symptom or description	Control (follow label rates)
Petal blight	Flowers become spotted, water soaked, limp, and are quickly destroyed. Dead flowers cling to plants instead of falling to ground. The disease is more severe in cool, moist springs.	Remove old mulch and replace with new in early spring. Drench soil area under plants with Terraclor in January. Spray with Thylate or Benomyl when blooms begin to open. Continue at 7- to 10-day intervals during bloom period. Good coverage is essential. You may use Bayleton once when buds show color.
Leaf gall	Pale green or whitish fleshy galls; leaves curled or deformed. Cool, moist weather favors development of leaf gall.	Handpick and destroy affected leaves. Spray with Bayleton, Ferbam, Captan, or a fixed copper fungicide. Start spraying at end of bloom period and continue at 2- to 3-week intervals until mid-June.
Leaf spots	Brown or bronzed leaves, with tiny black fruiting bodies on the dead tissues. Irregular and colored spots on leaf.	Use Maneb, Ferbam, or Bayleton beginning at end of bloom period. Continue at 2-week intervals through growing season or as long as there are young leaves. Refer to Bayleton label for application intervals.
Nematodes	Leaves turn yellow and plants are stunted. They do not respond favorably to water and fertilizer.	No chemical control available. Other conditions mimic nematode injury; collect a soil sample from root zone for nematode analysis. Check with your county Extension office for details on getting the nematode analysis.
Winter injury	Entire branches turn brown and die during the growing season. Look for bark splitting near base of limbs or at ground.	Use recommended varieties. Keep plants in good thrifty condition. Water regularly during late summer and fall.
Iron chlorosis	Leaves turn light green to yellow, then creamy white between the veins; but veins remain green. Usually caused by soil pH being too high, making iron unavailable to plants.	You can lower soil pH by adding ferrous sulfate, finely ground sulfur, or aluminum sulfate. Spray foliage with iron chelate for temporary effects.
Spider mites	Leaves become yellow-flecked with stippled areas. You can see fine webs on leaves by looking closely.	Spray underside of leaves with acephate (Orthene) or dimethoate (Cygon). Repeat application in 7 days to take care of egg hatch.
Azalea lacebug	Upper surface of leaves has a gray, balanced, or coarse-stippled appearance. Underside of leaves becomes discolored by excrement and cast skins.	Spray underside of leaves with malathion, dimethoate, or acephate. Repeat application every 10 days until you get control.
Scale insects	Usually on twigs or branches. Various colors and shapes. Some look like bits of white cotton; others are brownish.	You can use malathion or acephate as spray during crawler stage. You can use dimethoate anytime.
Foliage feeders	Leaf destruction.	Spray with Diazinon or acephate.

Soils and Fertility

Azaleas do best in an acid soil with a pH of 4.0 to 6.0. The soil needs to be loose, well-drained, and contain lots of organic matter. Adding lots of peat moss, leaf mulch, old sawdust, or compost also tends to make the soil more acid, while adding plenty of organic matter. If the native soil is poorly drained, you should make raised beds. You can build raised beds with landscape timbers or crossties or by hilling the soil up 8 to 12 inches above ground level. Azaleas do not tolerate wet feet! In foundation plantings where building the house has removed topsoil or added trash and mortar mix, be extra careful to adjust pH. A soil test is the best way to ensure proper soil acidity.

Materials that make soils more acid are ferrous sulfate or copperas, aluminum sulfate, and finely ground dusting sulfur. Adding liberal lots of peat moss and decaying oak leaves also tends to make the soil more acid. Most garden stores sell fertilizer especially for azaleas. Basically, the fertilizer should be a slow-release type (released over a long period of time). Apply fertilizer at rates based on soil tests or at rates stated on the fertilizer label.

Planting and Mulching

Azaleas are usually planted in beds. Prepare the planting site several weeks before planting. In preparing the bed, place a mix of 50 percent sharp sand and 50

percent organic matter over the ground, and work it thoroughly into the soil to about 1 foot deep. If a soil test says pH adjustments are needed, it is best to apply the recommended materials as you prepare the bed. Azaleas are fibrous, shallow-rooted plants. When planting container-grown plants, disturb the roots to break the circular pattern. It may be necessary to make vertical cuts into the root ball to break the circular pattern. Do not plant any deeper than the plant was originally planted in the container. Planting azaleas deeper than the original planted depth assures disastrous results. Apply 2 to 4 inches of pine straw, pine bark, or other suitable mulch material after planting.

Watering

Azaleas have an extremely fibrous root system that stays relatively shallow. A good watering schedule is essential during the growing season. Azaleas need the equivalent of 1 inch of rain every 7 to 10 days. Be sure to keep watering during late summer and until winter rains begin.

Follow-up Care

Azaleas have shallow roots, and you can easily damage them by cultivation such as hoeing or raking. You can prune azaleas in early spring immediately after flowering. Refer to MSU Extension Service Information Sheet 204 for proper pruning methods.