

Growing Awesome Azaleas

Growing awesome evergreen Azaleas is easy once you learn what they want

Evergreen Azaleas

Provide weeks of blooms and year round foliage for perimeters and woodland borders. Our research at CenterPeace® Headquarters in NJ shows modern breeding programs are bringing about new Azaleas with bigger flowers, more colorful summer and winter foliage and tougher constitutions. Types vary from one foot edges to six foot hedges. This is why evergreen Azaleas are a garden staple. Growing Azaleas is easy. It's a matter of finding out what they want and giving it to them. Their requirements, though a bit different than other plants, aren't costly or time-consuming. The biggest key is the right site.

The Right Stuff comes from The Right Site

Azaleas like well-drained, moist soils. A contradiction in terms! Think of it this way: they don't like their roots sitting in water, but they like to be watered. How to do that? Make a planting bed that drains, so we can irrigate without drowning them. There are numerous ways of improving drainage. Here are the two most effective:

1. Raise the level of the planting bed above the surrounding area. That way, after a soaking rain or irrigation, excess water drains away, leaving a moist, yet well-drained area.
2. Improve soil quality by adding organic matters. Organics improve drainage in clay soils by making them fluffy through aerating and oxygenating. Organics improve dry sandy soils by increasing their richness and water-holding capacity. Organics have another plus. Azaleas perform best in acidic soils. Most organic matters help make soils acidic.

Get your Azaleas in the right site and you've won 90% of the game. What else can we do?

Shady Characters

Azaleas appreciate some shade. A dappled, medium shade is just about perfect to "take the edge off" and help you safely through those summer vacations when you just can't water. Flowers bloom larger and for longer periods in shade, too. Azaleas grow in full sun with regular watering. (See "Mulch"). Deep shade is okay, too. It has its advantages and disadvantages. Leaves tend to be larger and glossier and watering needs are lowest in shade. On the other hand plants tend to "stretch" for the light, making them lanky. Some tastes go for that wild look but if you like a full, compact plant you'll have to prune severely in deep shade conditions. Finally, since setting of flower buds is largely a function of light, Azaleas are most floriferous in higher light sites.

Mulch – The Great Protector

Azaleas love mulch. Mulch protects. In summer, it acts like sunglasses, blocking the burning, drying sun. In winter, mulch is a blanket of protection against both quick freezes and extended cold which will damage roots.

We find peat to be a perfect soil amender but the worst mulch. Once allowed to dry, peat knits together and seals itself, preventing water penetration. The best mulches are coarse organics like wood chips that allow easy water penetration. We do not like stone mulch because it's more of a heat/cold conductor than an insulator. Azaleas don't like extremes. A coarse organic mulch reduces the extremes in temperature and moisture conditions.

Organic mulches eventually decompose and help condition soil. They should be replenished once a year so that they maintain about a 2" depth.

(One all-around plant tip: keep mulch a couple inches away from main stems and crowns of plants. This precaution reduces bark rots and insect problems.)

Pruning for flowers and dialing for dollars

One of the top-ten phone calls garden authorities get is "My Azaleas won't bloom." I've never seen a case when this problem couldn't be explained by one of two things.

1. Azaleas set next spring's flower buds in July. If we prune after July 1st we're cutting off next year's buds! Prune in May or June, soon after flowering, and then let them be.
2. Volume merchandisers buy Azaleas from wherever there's a bargain, even if it's from a region where less hardy types are grown. Less hardy types may live here but their flower buds won't survive hard winters. The greatest injustice you can do yourself is to buy the cheapest Azaleas. Cheap isn't cheap if you don't get nice plants that perform well and give years of service. Gardens are a long term investment; good gardens give long term returns. Get northern grown, northern conditioned Azaleas. They're not expensive, just a little bit more, and they deliver top performances.

Feed me an acid, man.

Another common question is "What can I do about yellow leaves on my Azaleas?" Fall yellowing is normal, when old interior and bottom leaves turn yellow and drop off. But if your Azaleas are showing chlorotic leaves in spring you've got one of two problems:

1. A non-hardy Azalea that's suffered root damage, replace it with a good northern grown Azalea.
2. Your site soil is not adequately acidic. Don't plant Azaleas in limestone soils or up against lime/concrete based foundations. Never add lime to Azalea soils. Apply recommended rates of acidifying fertilizers and color should eventually green up.

It doesn't take a sophisticate to grow awesome Azaleas. It just takes a bit of knowledge, and now you've got it! Grow some awesome Azaleas.