Friday’s Feature
By
Theresa Friday
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Caterpillars and lacebugs may be stressing your azaleas

Hot weather can certainly test your devotion to the landscape. Although working outside in August in not very pleasant, many plants still need our attention including one of the South’s most popular shrubs, the evergreen azalea.

The amount and quality of azalea flowering during spring is largely dependent upon the health of plants during the previous summer. Azaleas that are well maintained will flower their best next spring. Azaleas experiencing stress during the summer can be expected to flower poorly. Some of the summer stresses include iron deficiency, azalea lacebugs and azalea caterpillars.

If your azalea leaves are looking yellow, they may need iron. Two conditions can tie up iron to the point that plants begin to show deficiency symptoms. Soils with a high pH, or an alkaline level, make iron less available. This condition commonly exists where soil has been limed too much, or around the base of homes where masonry materials were used.

Iron can also be chemically tied up in the soil if it contains excessively high levels of phosphorus. Fertilizers that contain a high percentage of this element should be avoided in most cases.

Many garden centers sell a product known as “liquid iron.” It can be mixed at label rates for either a foliar or soil application. Ironite® is a granular iron supplement found at local garden supply stores. Where iron is needed the results can be remarkable, providing a greenup within three to five days.

Many azaleas are showing lacebug damage to foliage. The first sign of damage on azalea leaves is a light stippling of many small white, brown or yellow specks. Each speck on the upper leaf surface coincides with damage on the underside of the leaf where lacebugs pierce cells and suck sap.
Light infestations by this pest go largely unnoticed. Unless controlled, heavy feeding by lacebugs can severely stress, and even stunt azaleas.

Another sign of infestation are small, dark shiny spots on the undersides of leaves. These are eggs that are covered with a varnish-like substance.

Non-insecticidal control of lacebugs is possible. Some homeowners are able to remove them and keep populations below damaging levels by spraying their plants with a forceful stream of water.

Suggested insecticides for lacebug control include horticultural soaps and oils, carbaryl (Sevin liquid), cyfluthrin (Bayer Advanced Power Force Multi-insect Killer), imidacloprid (Bayer Advanced Tree & Shrub Insect Control) and lambda-cyhalothrin (Spectracide Triazicide). Follow label directions carefully. Make certain that plants have been well irrigated one to two days prior to treatment and avoid applying sprays during hotter, brighter times of the day.

The azalea caterpillar is found in Florida from July through October. Fortunately these large caterpillars are not very common, but when they do occur, they can cause serious defoliation in a short period of time.

The mature caterpillars are predominately black, with eight broken yellow (occasionally white) lengthwise stripes. They have a bright red head, belly, legs and back end. The mature larvae migrate to the ground and pupate in leaf litter or the soil. Caterpillars may be shaken from plants and stepped on, hand-picked or sprayed with Bacillus thuringiensis k. (Dipel or Thuricide).

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.
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