

Friday's Feature

By

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Prune azaleas immediately after flowering

Azaleas are spring showoffs. No other landscape shrub can beat evergreen azaleas for flower power when they are in full bloom. Unfortunately, many azaleas never display their true beauty because they are improperly pruned.

For the most part, evergreen azaleas are naturally well behaved. If they are carefully selected, carefully sited, carefully planted, and properly tended, there is usually little need to prune them. Nothing is more beautiful than an azalea that has been allowed to grow and bloom naturally.



Place evergreen azaleas where they can grow and bloom naturally without pruning.

Photo credit: Theresa Friday

Nevertheless, there are some situations in which pruning can be useful, enough to justify a look at the subject.

Why prune? First, to remove dead wood. Branches may be killed by cold, disease or many other reasons. Prune out the dead wood back to sound wood, i.e., where a nick with the fingernail reveals a layer of green cambium under the outer bark.

Another reason for pruning evergreen azaleas is to scale back an overgrown shrub that is beginning to cover a window or crowd a walkway. Remember, pruning would not be necessary if a smaller-growing variety

had been selected initially and positioned properly when planted. It is possible, however, to keep ambitious plants in bounds by regular judicious pruning.

When necessary to control its size, you should begin to manage your azaleas when they reach the maximum desirable size. Identify the tallest or widest shoots or branches on the overgrown shrub. Use your hand pruners to shorten these branches. Instead of making a cut at the edge of the shrub, prune the branch down within the shrub. When the shortened branch sprouts, the new growth will be inside the shrub creating a thicker, fuller plant. And the new growth will not immediately stick out above the rest of the shrub – something that commonly happens if pruning cuts are made just back to the edge of the shrub or when azaleas are sheared. Keep cutting back the tallest and widest shoots until the shrub is the desired size.

Unless you are trying to create a formal clipped hedge, avoid shearing azaleas with hedge clippers because this destroys their attractive natural shape. It is better to use hand pruners to remove or shorten selected branches to achieve the desired shape and size.

Because most evergreen azaleas start setting flower buds in mid-summer, proper timing of pruning is critical to ensure blooms the following year. In general, you will want to prune azaleas immediately after flowering. You may continue to prune occasionally as needed into the early summer, up until late June, early July at the very latest. After that, chances increase that you will remove flower buds when you prune.

Many gardeners now have Encore azaleas which bloom more than once a year. Most Encores and other multiseason types require very little pruning to retain good form and maintain the desired size. If you think your azaleas need pruning, do so immediately after the spring flowering.

And if you have an azalea hedge that has been sheared for years, you may want to consider restoring the shrubs to their natural beauty. This can be done using a rejuvenation technique. For more information on rejuvenating shrubs, contact your local Extension Office or review an online UF/IFAS publication at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG087>.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental 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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