

## **Pensacola News Journal**

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### **Spring Azalea Care**

Evergreen azaleas are signature plants in southern landscapes. A sure sign of spring in our area are the masses of spectacular azalea blooms. To ensure that your azaleas will remain healthy and vigorous, it's important to give them proper care.

Azaleas perform best in areas of filtered sunlight. Their shallow root system and low tolerance to poor soil drainage makes site selection and placement important. Since many valuable shade trees were lost during the hurricane, some previously shaded azaleas are now exposed to full sun. Azaleas that are exposed to direct sunlight all day or a hot western exposure may be more susceptible to problems. Under high light situations, plants may become stunted, lose foliage, become covered with lichen and are more susceptible to lace bugs.

It's going to be very tempting to move azaleas this spring. But, if at all possible, wait. Fall is the best time to transplant.

Two of the more important steps in ensuring healthy productive azaleas are proper pruning and correct fertilization. The best time to prune and fertilize is right after the flowers fade.

Azaleas that have plenty of room to grow do not require a lot of pruning and form beautiful rounded, layered canopies. However, if your azalea is outgrowing its space, some pruning may be necessary. There are several different pruning techniques than can be used. Just remember, to ensure that you have beautiful blooms next year, do not heavily prune azaleas after early June.

If you want your azalea to maintain some of its natural form, then use a combination of heading and thinning cuts. To reduce shrub height make selective heading cuts. Heading cuts remove branches back to a healthy bud or another branch. Thinning cuts reduce the shrub's density and allows light to penetrate the shrub encouraging interior growth. With a thinning cut, branches are generally removed back to ground level.

If you need to drastically reduce the size of your azaleas, you can cut all the stems

back to about 6 to 18 inches above the ground. This rejuvenation technique can be successful if done right after blooming. This allows sufficient time for new growth to mature and harden off for winter. The advantage to this method is that the work is quick, decision making is minimal, and the "new" shrub that will emerge should be uniform in growth habit or can easily be corrected. The disadvantage is that you run the risk of a plant dying.

Azaleas also benefit from spring fertilization. A good fertilization program for these shrubs is based on three factors. First, azaleas thrive in acid soil. Second, they are easily injured by moderate to high fertilizer applications. And lastly, they have low nutritional requirements compared to many other plants. Therefore, it's best to avoid the standard fertilizer and use a special "Azalea-Camellia" fertilizer.

Follow the label directions carefully and apply the fertilizer to the azalea's root zone. Spread the fertilizer on the soil or mulch surface. Since azalea roots are very shallow, you can damage roots by trying to work the fertilizer into the soil.

**Tip of the Week:** Azalea leaf gall is a fungus that causes thickened, fleshy and distorted leaves. To prevent an infestation next year, be sure to pull or clip off the galls and destroy them. If left, they will eventually fall to the ground where the fungus carries over until next spring.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names 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.



