



Azaleas & Rhododendrons

Site Selection and Planting

Choose a site protected from drying winds and excessive direct sunlight. An area with some high broken shade is ideal. Avoid planting too close to a building foundation, under a roof overhang, or under trees with dense shading.

Azaleas and rhododendrons grow well in a porous, well-drained, acid soil (pH 4.5-6.0). At least 25% to 50% of the mix should be made up of organic material such as pine bark soil conditioner or compost. When planting, dig the hole approximately twice as large as the container. Remove the plant from the container and gently loosen the roots if matted. Situate the plant so the top of the root ball is two to three inches above ground level. Never plant an inch or two deeper than the rootball, as is sometimes recommended for other plants. Back fill the hole with your prepared organic mix and water well.

After planting, a light 2-3" mulch over the bed and root zone is beneficial but should not heavily cover root ball nor should it make contact with the stems or trunk. Pine bark, pine needles, or any other organic material is suitable for mulch and these will help conserve moisture, moderate temperatures, and restrict growth of weeds. The fibrous roots of azaleas and rhododendrons grow close to the surface and should not be hoed or cultivated.

Fertilizing

A balanced acid fertilizer, often called Azalea-Rhododendron-Camellia fertilizer is ideal. Holly-tone™ is an excellent organic fertilizer suitable for azaleas and rhododendrons. The best time to fertilize is in the spring just after flowering and again in late June for formation of next years flower buds. Spread the label recommended rate around the dripline, not near the stem. Be careful not to over-fertilize azaleas and rhododendrons as this can actually damage the plants. They are not heavy feeders, and often a good, rich compost as a mulch over the root area can be sufficient to feed them.

Pruning

For azaleas a limited amount of pruning and shaping may be done, preferably in the spring immediately after flowering. On rhododendrons, pinching the single terminal shoot just as it starts to grow and elongate in the spring will encourage branching and produce a more compact plant. Gently snapping off the faded bloom trusses after blooming will also groom your plant and encourage more branching and vigor.

Pest and Disease Control

Pests are not a major problem, but like most plants, there are a few pests to look out for. One such pest is lacebugs which cause the leaves to begin to take on a faded appearance. Close observation will reveal tiny stippling created by the insects as they suck the juices from the underside of the leaves. You may also see black tar-like spots on the leaf undersides and even the gray-beige triangular shaped insects themselves. Lacebug problems are worse for plants that are sited in full sun or afternoon sun. Mites can also be found on azaleas causing the leaves to take on a bronze-tinted look. If you suspect either of these insects may be a problem, take a few leaves to Homewood for diagnosis and recommended treatment. Both of these pests can cause considerable cosmetic damage to the plants as well as rob them of some of their vigor.

Rhododendrons are susceptible to a Twig Blight (*Botryosphaeria*) especially during warm, wet springs. It usually appears in late May as sudden wilt and dieback of random branches. Spray in March and after flowering with chlorothalonil (Daconil, Fung-onil) or copper sulfate.

One of the most common problems associated with azaleas and rhododendrons is wet feet. They cannot tolerate being in a boggy area where the roots are always wet as this can cause root rot. Keep in mind, however, that they are both shallow-rooted plants and, in the middle of summer when it is hot and dry, they will be some of the first plants in your yard to dry out and need water.

With just a little care and a watchful eye, you can easily grow these beautiful plants in your garden!