

Care for Azaleas

Q. My Azaleas look terrible. I have definitely neglected them, but I hope it isn't too late. Is there anything I can do to resuscitate them for spring?

A. There's some basic information that you need to know to keep your azaleas healthy. There are many cultivars and hybrid varieties as well as color choices. Check out this article, *Azalea Care*, from Clemson University Extension Home and Garden Information Center: <https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/azalea-care/>. This article is a great place to start with indepth information.

As with all plants you need to assess your soil and sun conditions. Azaleas need pH of soil from 4.5 - 6. If you are not sure of your pH level, you can take a soil sample to your local Extension Office. The sample results will provide information you need to amend the soil. Once you have determined location, soil conditions and type of plant that will work best it is important to provide the basic care for your plants.

Azaleas have shallow roots so proceed with care and consider carefully where you will plant your azaleas. Mulching will protect the plants from summer heat and cold damage in the winter. Proper watering practices can help you avoid the most common diseases on azaleas including petal blight, leaf gall, leaf spots, dieback, and root and crown rot.

Fertilizing your plant should occur in the spring and fall, with half the amount of fertilizer in the fall that is required in the spring. Remember to always follow the directions provided with the fertilizer you choose. Using a fertilizer made for azaleas is recommended. It is important to water thoroughly after fertilizing. But do not overwater your azaleas, they do not like waterlogged soil. To provide the best watering method, use drip irrigation or a soaker hose when the summer turns hot and dry.

One of the most prolific pests that attack these plants are the Azalea lace bug. It found its way to the United States from Japan in the 1900s and is very destructive to azaleas, primarily the evergreen variety but will also attack the deciduous varieties. The lace bug will also attack Mountain Laurel. For identification, signs of infestation, and control of the lace bug, read publication SP290-E from the University of Tennessee Extension titled *Insects: The Azalea Lace Bug* at <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/SP290-E.pdf>. Look for their tiny eggs "usually deposited in the underside tissue of a young leaf along the mid-rib or large vein" of your azalea. Keep in mind the lifecycle of these insects:

Female lace bugs lay groups of eggs on the underside of the leaves in September and October. These eggs overwinter and hatch during March and April. The populations build from spring through autumn, with about four generations possible. A large population of lace bugs can be established during July, August, and September. It is quite possible to find all stages of the lace bug together under a leaf during this time.

Azaleas need little to no pruning. If you need to prune, be sure to do so in the spring after flowering and before July.

Good luck with your azaleas! We hope this information is helpful.

The Master Gardeners of Northeast Tennessee