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**Arkansas Democrat-Gazette**  
**Azaleas - January 2018**

One of the most common plants we grow in our landscapes in the south is azaleas. According to the national azalea society there are more than 10,000 varieties of azaleas that have been registered. With so many varieties, no nursery could carry even a tenth of them, but they do have plenty to choose from. And with so many choices, there is an azalea that will work in almost any landscape if you are willing to follow a few simple guidelines. .

Azaleas are not drought-tolerant plants. Most prefer filtered sunlight, or morning sun and afternoon shade. They need a well-drained acidic soil which is high in organic matter. Heavy, wet soils can lead to an early death. When planting azaleas, make sure to plant them slightly shallower than they are growing in their containers. Score the root ball in several places to help the roots spread out at planting. Azaleas get root-bound quite quickly in a container. If you don't cut through these wrapped roots, the plants will not begin to spread out their roots which will hinder establishment.

Once you plant, mulch the plant with 2 to 4 inches of pine straw, leaves, pine bark, wood chips or whatever is available, but leave an inch around the stems without any mulch. Then water it slowly and thoroughly. Water it again the next day, and at least once a week for several weeks. The goal is to settle the soil and remove any air spaces, and to make sure the disturbed roots have ready access to water until they can grow into the surrounding soil. Remember to watch small plants for a month or more, and large plants for a year or more, and water them deeply whenever they look wilted.

On established plants an inch of rainfall each week is ideal. Supplemental water may be needed if the rainfall is much less than that, especially if there is no rainfall for extended periods. Newly planted azaleas, those that were transplanted, and azaleas which are in full sun or locations exposed to drying winds are most in need of supplemental watering. Fortunately, drooping leaves show the need for water well before the plant dries out completely, and watering it slowly and deeply usually restores it within hours.

Most evergreen varieties of azaleas are native to Japan, while those that are native to North America are deciduous types which lose their leaves in the fall. Native azaleas come in shades of white, purple, pink, red, orange and yellow. They are also usually quite fragrant. Evergreen azaleas come in shades of purple, pink, red, and white, but no yellows or light oranges. Some plants have multiple colors, stripes or flecks in the blooms.

Azaleas come in a wide range of mature sizes. There are dwarf plants that grow no taller than 10-12 inches with large southern indicas which can grow 12-15 feet tall. All azaleas can be grown in the southern 2/3 of Arkansas, but those in the northern tier do have to choose a bit more wisely, since cold tolerance can limit their choices. All azaleas should bloom in the spring, but there are now re-blooming varieties like Encore and ReBloom which can bloom again in the fall.

If pruning is needed, it should be done in the spring only after bloom. If you prune after mid-June you begin to limit the plants ability to rebound with new growth and set

good flowers for the next season. If you choose your varieties with plans for the mature size you need, you will limit the needs for major pruning. Flower buds will begin to set in the late summer into early fall.

There are many gardeners interested in growing and learning more about azaleas. The national Azalea Society was formed to further the understanding and interest in this plant. They offer membership to anyone interested in azaleas, from home gardeners to students, plant collectors and plant professionals. There are local chapters across the country, but once a year they hold a national convention. This year, the national convention is coming to Little Rock, April 5-7 at the Holiday Inn Airport. Since there will be quite a few azalea experts from across the country in town, they are teaching a one day Azalea 101 class Basic Education about the South's Most Popular Landscape Shrub for the public which will be held from 8 a.m. -2:30 p.m. on April 5 at the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture State Cooperative Extension Service Office in Little Rock at 2301 South University Avenue in Little Rock. Topics include Variety selection, basic culture and care, propagation, insects and diseases, and more. Speakers include: Rick Bauer, President – Azalea Society of America (ASA) and Northern Virginia ASA chapter, Ronnie Palmer, Arkansas Member ASA, Buddy Lee, Louisiana Chapter ASA, Robert Thau, Texas Chapter ASA, Charlie Andrews, Georgia Member ASA, Allen Owings, Louisiana Chapter ASA. The \$45 registration fee includes all educational sessions, handouts, lunch, refreshments, and 6-month ASA membership. Space is limited and pre-registration is March 1. To register for it, follow this link:

[https://www.lrmeetings.com/Ungerboeck/emc00/PublicSignIn.aspx?&SessionID=fb9ej8fa4fckej7&Lang=\\*](https://www.lrmeetings.com/Ungerboeck/emc00/PublicSignIn.aspx?&SessionID=fb9ej8fa4fckej7&Lang=*). Those who register for the class will not only get some great education, but will get a 6 month trial membership in the Azalea society which includes a quarterly publication called The Azalean. This journal has timely informative articles about azaleas and other educational opportunities.

For those who are interested in the full conference which opens Thursday evening and ends Saturday evening, there are limited spaces available with a registration fee of \$200. The conference includes two days of garden tours plus speakers each evening. There are only 50 slots available for the azalea conference. You can download a registration form and mail it in <https://www.azaleas.org/convention-> or you can log on and register online at:

[https://www.lrmeetings.com/Ungerboeck/emc00/PublicSignIn.aspx?&SessionID=fb1ej0famfc3ei0&Lang=\\*](https://www.lrmeetings.com/Ungerboeck/emc00/PublicSignIn.aspx?&SessionID=fb1ej0famfc3ei0&Lang=*).

For more information on azaleas and their culture and care, or to learn more about the Azalea Society and the upcoming conference go to: <https://www.azaleas.org/>

