

Colorful Azaleas are the Breath of Spring

What a wonderful time of year with all of the explosions of spring color. The greens are fresh and the flowering shrubs and trees are so vibrant in the wakening landscape. The azaleas, oh the azaleas! They are so striking now in the informal landscape and wooded setting. If you are thinking about planting some for future enjoyment, here are a few tips for success.

Azaleas bloom from late February to early April in North Florida, depending on the cultivar. Although we can grow many types here and in central Florida, they just don't do well in south Florida. Azalea hybrids that you may be familiar with in northern states may not get enough chilling temperatures to grow down here. But we have hundreds of selections that thrive in Florida, so have fun choosing some.

You can use azaleas in many ways to enhance your home landscape. Use them in foundation plantings, mass borders, or as specimen plants. Their shape and growth are rather open and graceful, so they are often used in informal settings. Large growing azaleas can be used as a background for lower plantings while shorter azaleas work in foregrounds. Check on the size, form, and specific requirements of the plant before buying it for a particular location that you have in mind.

Karume hybrids are very hardy plants that perform well in North Florida. Although they are referred to as dwarf, they can reach a height of four foot or more. They bloom from January to February and come in a wide range of colors. Satsuki hybrids, also from Japan, are the shortest of the hybrids. They come in many colors, too, but they bloom later in our landscapes.

There are tall azaleas that work well as background plants. They are large enough to be viewed from a distance, so they can be planted away from the house. Southern Indian hybrids bloom in early spring, come in many shades from white to orange-red, and quickly grow up to ten feet tall and wide. Native azaleas, often called bush or wild honeysuckle, have trumpet shaped flowers in many unusual colors.

Azaleas prefer filtered sun such as in speckled sunlight areas under trees. They won't flower or grow well if the shade is too dense. Place them so that they are not in the direct early morning sun. After freezing nighttime temperatures, the plant needs to thaw slowly. Rapid thawing is very damaging to the plant tissue and can cause bark splitting and die back.

Our sandy soils should be amended with organic material and fertilizers for azaleas. They prefer a well drained soil because the roots are fibrous and shallow. Azaleas are 'acid loving' and should be planted in soils with a pH of 4.5 to 5.5. Have your soil tested before planting so you can use the appropriate amendments to adjust the soil pH. You can get your soil pH tested by the UF Columbia County Master Gardeners on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at the UF Extension office. Call 352-5384 for information.

You can plant container grown azaleas any time if you care for them. Water newly planted azaleas twice a week during dry spells. Watered established plants every 10 to 14 days to keep the soil moist at 14 to 18 inches deep. Fertilizer for acid-loving plants should be applied each season according to the directions. Keep periodically checking your plants for insects so you can keep ahead of any problems.

For more information on colorful landscape plants, visit the UF/IFAS website <http://solutionsforyourlife.com> or call the Master Gardeners on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 752-5384. Don't miss their Spring Vegetable Gardening presentation at 1pm on March 21st at the downtown Lake City Library.

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