AZALEAS NEED CARE

In early spring, azaleas provide us with a fabulous show of color. Reds, pinks, purples and white can be seen all over town. Although they only last for a limited time, azalea flowers are beautiful.

However, to keep the show returning year after year for those precious few weeks, azaleas need a little care all year long. And one practice needs to be completed in the next few weeks - pruning.

Pruning is necessary to obtain a full, well-branched azalea. Several light prunings early in the spring season will result in compact growth with a full look. Start pruning the azaleas by removing any diseased and declining branches. Then remove any branches that need to be cut back to the ground. Next trim any thin, spindly, and misshaped stems. Finally, prune the plants to the desired height.

If the azaleas are overgrown and more than onethird of the plants need to be cut back, prune in stages - a month apart - to prevent the plant from being too severely stressed. The flowers of azaleas grow on the previous year's growth. That means that the plant produces flower buds this year, but they won't bloom until next spring. Pruning after flower bud initiation will decrease the number of spring flowers.

Therefore, established plants should be pruned shortly after flowering or at least before mid summer. Fourth of July is usually a good benchmark to remember. Always finish pruning azaleas by July 4 every year to maximize the blooms for next spring.

There are two main environmental conditions that affect the health, growth and bloom of azaleas: soil condition and sun and shade exposure.

Azaleas prefer an acidic soil. Soils near concrete sidewalks, building foundations, driveways or roads are often too alkaline for azaleas. If azaleas are planted in an alkaline soil, the result is iron chlorosis, or yellowing, of the area between the leaf veins.

Azaleas also prefer to be planted in a relatively shady location. Partial shade under pine trees or strategically spaced hardwoods provide the ideal conditions for healthy growth and optimum flowering. If the shade is too dense, it reduces plant growth and flowering. If planted in the sun, azaleas are susceptible to azalea lace bugs (*Stephi mitis pyrioides*).

The small insects suck the juices out of the plant's leaves. They cause the leaves to turn a mottled silvery-gray color, which can be found on the underside. The insect's black excrement is also a sign of a lace bug infestation.

Insecticidal soap is effective for the control of lace bugs. Thorough spray coverage, especially to the underside of the leaves, is essential.

Frequent and light applications of fertilizers for all plants are necessary in Florida's sandy soils. Azaleas like acid-forming fertilizers such as 12-4-8 or 15-5-15, to be applied in the spring, summer, fall and winter. Micronutrients should be applied routinely.

Complete fertilizers containing micro nutrients are available and can be used for normal fertilization. Follow application rates on the fertilizer bag. Make sure not to overapply the fertilizer, which can cause an increase in the plant's pest susceptibility, groundwater pollution and a waste of your time and money.

Tom MacCubbin, Orange County extension agent with the University of Florida! IF AS, recommends five steps for encouraging new growth and flowers by next spring.

- Maintain a moist site, watering when the surface inch of soil begins to dry to the touch.
- Feed once in June and October with an azalea fertilizer or similar product.
- Maintain a 3- to 4-inch mulch layer over the root system.
- Control lace bugs as needed with a natural oil spray.
As new growth begins, refrain from pruning all but lanky and extra long shoots.

For more information on azaleas or other gardening information, call the Osceola County Master Gardeners at 321-697-3000 Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

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