AZALEAS

WOW! We just missed a major cold front. If you were worn out trying to cover and protect tender plants, consider planting cold hardy azaleas. These plants can tough out frost or freezing weather. They are good plants for the landscape, providing greenery year ‘round. Their winter flowers make them a colorful addition to most any landscape.

Azaleas are in bloom now, so this is a great time to shop for plants. Proper site selection, soil preparation and planting produce low care plants for your home garden. Azaleas are evergreen flowering plants which produce an abundance of flowers in the spring. They are relatives of the spectacular deciduous rhododendrons which are popular with our northern neighbors. Save your energy. Those rhododendrons will not make it in our climate, so stick with the easy choices. You've got hundreds to choose from.

Several types of azaleas are native to North Florida's moist hardwood hammocks. While much of our waterfront woodland has given way to development, some plants still exist in their native habitat even in our milder Central Florida climate. Their honeysuckle like flowers are in clusters at the shoot tips and vary from white to pale pink to yellow-orange. Look closely as you visit Wekiva Springs State Park north of Orlando or the Little Big Econ State Forest near Christmas.

The Florida Department of Agriculture's Doyle Connor building in Gainesville has several species growing in a flower bed under pine shade. Call O'Leno State Park for the best time to see their natural azalea display around the sinkhole north west of Gainesville near High Springs.

Rhododendron austrinum, commonly sold as flame azalea is a large upright plant bearing golden to orange blossoms on naked stems. Rhododendron canescens is favored for its faint fragrance and white to deep pink blossoms. A white flowered species which blooms mid-summer is common at the Orange County 4-H Park near Christmas.

These native azaleas have the deciduous characteristic of the northern rhododendrons. Since they lose their leaves in winter, they will not serve well as a hedge or foundation planting. Instead, plant one of the natives for a splash of spring color among green foliage of ligustrum, anise shrub, viburnum, daylily, liriope or India hawthorn.

Native azaleas are now available from local nurseries who specialize in native plants.

Many hybrid azaleas are ideally suited to our Central Florida landscapes. Color, shape, height and leaf size all vary so look for what you prefer now while the plants are in bloom. Our fact sheet, ENH 37 on Azaleas for Florida has information on the characteristics of 45 different hybrids.

Provide moist fertile soil with at least partial shade for best growth of native and hybrid azaleas. Plants set into full sun locations often suffer from drought stress and are more frequently attacked by azalea lace bugs. If you plant into sandy soil, amend the entire planting bed, not just the individual hole, by digging or tilling in a three to a 4-inch layer of compost or humus top soil. Work this into the upper foot of soil.

While you prepare the planting hole, soak the root ball in a bucket of water. A few drops of soap added to the water will make the water slick and penetrate the root ball better. Dig the hole three times as wide as the root ball and only as deep as the root ball. Loosen densely packed roots and place plants in the soil at the same depth they were growing in the pots.

Azaleas prefer acidic soil so most do not need lime. Soils near concrete sidewalks, building foundations, driveways or roads are often too alkaline for azaleas. The result is iron chlorosis or yellowing of the area.
between the leaf veins. A three to 4 inch thick layer of leaf mulch pulled several inches away from stems is ideal for keeping roots cool and moist as it composts on site and enriches the soil. Add more mulch each spring and fall as needed when bags of raked leaves are free for the taking.

Azaleas should be pruned after flowering to promote more branching and dense shrubs. Light pruning can continue through summer but not after July 4th since next springs flowers set on the summer growth.

Consider adding some for your spring landscape planting project. Stop by the Osceola County Extension Office at the County Fairgrounds or call (321) 697-3000 to have a copy of Azaleas for Florida mailed to you, or search for azaleas on the EDIS Home Page.

Take time to visit Harry P. Leu Gardens in Orlando off Mills and Nebraska. The azaleas, dogwoods and camellias are gorgeous this time of year and each week the show changes as different varieties burst into bloom.

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Date: January 27th, 2000