

Gardening Basics

Growing Azaleas



"Azalea-lined House, Tyler, Texas" by StevenM_61 is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

It is easy to love the beautiful blooms of azalea plants and a drive through the Tyler "Azalea and Spring Flower Trails" is inspiring. However, trying to garden with azaleas in North Central Texas can be challenging. Azaleas, along with some other attractive flowering shrubs like camellias, gardenias, and rhododendrons, want acidic soil which is hard to come by in native North Texas soil.

Remember back in school chemistry class, teachers talked about the pH scale. It measures acidity and runs from 0 (pure acid) to 14 (alkaline). Plants grow best when the soil pH matches their needs. Soil that is too acidic or too alkaline results in a sickly or non-productive plant. Azaleas like their surrounding soil to be slightly moist with a pH of around 5.5 (a pH of 7 is considered neutral). The

typical soil pH in North Texas runs from 7.5 to 8.5, therefore, acidifying amendments and fertilizer will be necessary to grow azaleas successfully here.

Selecting a variety: As always, 'right plant, right place'. There are hundreds of varieties of azaleas available, both in evergreen and deciduous types. Carefully read the plant's label to match its eventual size, flower color, and cold hardiness with your location. Denton County is classified as being in USDA Zone 8a for cold hardiness, but it's wise to select varieties with hardiness of 1-2 zones colder (Zone 6-7).

Location: The University of Missouri Extension Services recommends protection from wind (avoid corners of buildings), on north or east side of house, partial shade (shelter from direct sun after 1pm), and planting where evergreens provide a sheltering background also helps show off the flowers. Finally, avoid planting azaleas near trees that have shallow root systems that compete for water and nutrients. These include maples, willows, cottonwoods, pin oaks and ash trees.

Next, and most important, is soil preparation. You can purchase soil specifically for growing azaleas and other acid-loving plants. Or you can add about 50% well-composted, organic material to your existing soil. Adding pine bark or pine-needle mulch, sulfur or iron sulfate and using an acidic fertilizer helps lower soil pH. It is essential that your soil drains well. If you need to check the soil drainage, here's a simple test you can do: "Improving Landscape Soils" see paragraph "Conducting a "Hole Test"" - <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/files/2010/10/soilimprovement.pdf>.

You may choose to plant your azalea in a container. Because you can purchase special azalea soil to fill the pot, you will not be battling native soil to keep the pH at the correct level. Remember that plants in containers both dry out more quickly and are more susceptible to cold weather so choose a variety with that in mind and never allow them to dry out.

Caring for your azalea: Add a 3-inch layer of mulch around your plant to moderate soil temperature and preserve moisture. Keep the mulch 4-6" away from the base of the shrub for bark health. Regular watering, especially when the weather gets hot, is essential. "To determine when to water, pull back a small area of mulch near the base of the plant

and check the moisture level of the root ball and surrounding soil. If the top few inches of soil feels dry, wet the soil to at least a depth of 6 to 8 inches.” (Clemson University). To aid with gauging moisture in soil, inexpensive moisture meters are commonly available for purchase at nurseries and online.

Because you created nutrient-rich soil before planting, your azalea usually does not require additional fertilizer in the first year. In subsequent years, a light application of acid fertilizer in the spring is suggested. Look for bags marked specifically for azaleas, camellias, or rhododendrons. Pull back the mulch and add on top of the soil around the plant as azaleas have shallow roots that can access that nutrient easily, water well, and replace the mulch.

You may choose to prune your azalea to remove dead branches or thin out areas blocking sunlight from the interior. Occasionally azaleas are bothered by spider mites and lace bugs or diseases such as blight or leaf spots. Texas A&M AgriLife’s Texas Plant Disease Handbook lists common disease problems and treatments for azaleas: <https://plantdiseasehandbook.tamu.edu/landscaping/shrubs/azalea/>

Resources:

Growing Azaleas and Rhododendrons, University of Missouri Extension:
<https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g6825>

Azalea Planting, Home and Garden Information Center, Clemson Cooperative Extension:
<https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/azaleas/>

Azalea Care, Home & Garden Information Center, Clemson Cooperative Extension:
<https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/azalea-care/>