

Growing Tips:

Help! My Azaleas are Blooming in December

By George Klump—La Crescenta, California

[Editor's Note: This article is based on an answer to the ASK US feature on the ASA Web-site. Look it up. You can get a quick answer from the site's text, can e-mail your question, or get an answer in person by locating your nearest chapter and visiting and joining. With the wild weather all over the US this winter, this advice seemed particularly timely.]

Question: From a woman in Gilmer, Texas, east of Dallas, USDA Zone 8a, posted on December 25, 2015. My azaleas are blooming! What do I do? This is very unusual isn't it? I live in Gilmer, TX. I planted them 2 years ago. This is the first time they have bloomed in winter. Will I lose my plants? Will they bloom again in the spring like normal? Any advice will be appreciated.

Answer: Fret not! Leave your azaleas alone, even if they have bloomed at this time of year. Much depends upon the weather you've been having.

We have many miscellaneous hybrids of Southern Indicas here at our place in a Southern California coastal area, and they sometimes bloom at this time. They aren't supposed to, but sometimes they have minds of their own. In fact, we have spot blooming with our 'Alaska' much of the year. It hurts nothing and blooms profusely during the "regular" time it is supposed to bloom. The same thing happens with 'Phoenicia'. Just let it do its thing. The main thing is not to prune the plants now, since the new growth is where the new flowers will come out. Prune that, and you will be cutting off the flowers for the next blooming season.

We lived in Dallas for years, so I have a fair idea of your climate. Be sure you keep water in the soil around your azaleas, especially in the cold weather and when those cold winds blow. They can desiccate a plant in a hurry. A desiccated plant is a desecrated plant. So keep water around the root zone to prevent this from happening. Of course, understand I mean for the water to drain away from the root zone rather quickly. The roots may be moist but they should NOT sit in water. That can lead to root rot, which is usually fatal.

One last suggestion. I would not feed your azaleas too much. They tend not to appreciate it. In other words too much kindness in this respect can often do more damage than good. For myself just to remember the times, I feed my plants just three times annually, Easter, Fourth of July and Labor Day. If Easter comes too early and the hard freezing season is not quite over, just wait till you are past that time a tad and, then, give them the "Easter" feeding. By the way, we use cottonseed meal on our plants. It's a slow release organic fertilizer which does not burn the plants at all. It also has the happy capacity of improving the soil over time.

If the ground is wet around your plants a bit before you put it down, that helps and, then, you can water it in gently, about a cupful around the drip line of each plant.

George E. Klump is president of the Southern California Chapter, ARS/ASA, Vireya Division. He discovered azaleas as a child. An uncle was a landscape gardener who planted several azaleas at his maternal grandparent's house next door. His father and paternal grandmother loved to work with flowers. They had some 200 roses in our backyard on a "show level", though he never entered any in competition, since it was not his interest. Azaleas, fuchsias and roses (among other plants) were in their garden all year long. He always figured that he would grow azaleas and rhododendrons, when he got his own place in 1967 in Dallas. He found a way to join the ARS in 1978 after they moved to California and worked with Bill Moynier and Carl Deul in the ARS chapter. He and Carl have worked on a possible article on tetraploid azaleas and their possible inheritable properties. Almost all of the ARS chapter grew azaleas as well as rhododendrons. He has a fair number of Satsuki azaleas along with the "regulars". In 2007 (or so) that ARS chapter added the ASA part to their chapter and plan now on fixing up their demonstration garden at UCLA's horticultural school in the near future. They began the ARS garden there at least 30 years ago, but UCLA underwent some administrative and physical changes in the meantime, so they are going to refurbish the whole thing. He is also a professional musician, and is organist at his church.

Call for Northern Azalea Gardeners

John Migas is the main contact for the Lake Michigan Chapter and has led several efforts to increase the chapter's activities, as national ASA president and as chapter president. Lake Michigan hosted the May 19-22, 2005 national convention held in Holland, Michigan. They also did a local "school-house" garden, which you'll hear more about soon. April 23-May 1, 2011 Lake Michigan and Tri-State chapters jointly hosted the Evansville, Indiana convention. This past April, he and Buddy Lee presented ASA Azalea City Awards to three cities in the region—Mt. Vernon, Princeton, and Petersburg, Indiana. But John cannot do the whole chapter's work by himself. He grows azaleas and does very big landscape projects in his business. He needs help from you northern azalea lovers to get involved in the chapter again. His contact info is azaleajohn@yahoo.com.