

Azalea Tasks for Spring

By *Charlie Andrews—Cumming, Georgia*

After the downtime of winter, we are usually eager to get back and spend more time in our gardens. Azaleas are pretty much low-maintenance plants, but here are five simple spring tasks to consider.

Clean-Up

If you are like me, you sometimes let your garden go in late fall and winter. Spring is a good time to catch up. Consider weeding around your plants. Don't do a lot of digging and disturb the shallow roots. Add more soil if any roots are exposed, and mulch around the plants. I use pine straw, but there are other good mulches. Mulch holds moisture and keeps the soil around the roots loose. Be careful not to let the mulch actually touch the trunks at the root crown; leave a little air space. Now is a good time to check the condition of your plant labels. Move them (e.g., higher as the plant grows) or replace them as necessary.

Prune

Azaleas generally do not need much pruning. Experts say the best time to prune is just after bloom. I say the best time is when you have pruners in your hand, and I almost always carry pruners with me. The problem with waiting for bloom is that could be from April to September, depending on the

species or cultivar. The only negative I see with pruning before bloom is you will lose seeing the flowers for that year on the cut stem. If possible, cut in time to allow flower bud set for next year. Without getting into too much detail here, prune to cut out dead wood, water sprouts, crossing branches, and excessively long growth. Pruning azaleas deserves an article of its own.

Plant

In more northern locations where the ground freezes, spring is the best time to plant. In milder climates, fall is best because the roots can become well established before the hotter weather of summer hits. How one should plant depends on the soil. In my acidic clay, I plant all azaleas in 3-ft wide holes but dig only a shovel deep. I add 16 shovelfuls of pine bark fines to the soil and thoroughly mix, creating a mound 9-12 inches above ground level. Essentially, I am planting the azaleas above ground level in very loose soil that will absorb water easily but also drain well.

Fertilize

Azaleas tolerate too little easier than too much fertilizer. One can correct iron, magnesium, or manganese chlorosis, but cannot easily cure toxicity from over fertilization. Some gardeners use slow-release fertilizers. I avoid the extra expense and fertilize with an ammonium-base fertilizer with micro nutrients twice a year (e.g., Agrium Super Rainbow 16-4-8), spring and late summer. Remember, less is better than more.

Talk

Finally, walk through your garden, stop and really observe your plants. I talk to mine and tell them how beautiful they are, and observe their growth, and buds, flowers, stems, leaves. I take pictures, both landscape and close-up. My plants tell me when they are happy and when they are not happy. In my case, sadness usually has to do with lack of water, but it could be white flies, lace bugs, or a few azalea galls that need taking care of.



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