

Azaleas





Azaleas

Azaleas, the major ornamental plant in Louisiana's residential and commercial landscapes, are available in a tremendous number of flower colors, growth habits and foliage characteristics. It's impossible to include a complete list and information on all of the available varieties, but this publication includes information on planting and maintenance, pest control recommendations and details on popular varieties.

Planting and Bed Preparation

One of the most important considerations for optimum performance of azaleas in landscape settings is proper bed preparation. Provide a loose, very well-drained soil. Most native soil in Louisiana is clay based. Amend clay soils with sand and a generous supply of organic matter, preferably pine bark. It is also recommended to raise the landscape bed 4 to 6 inches. Surface and internal drainage are critical.

Maintaining an ideal soil pH is also critical to azalea success. The recommended pH for azaleas is 5.0-6.0, with 5.0-5.5 being ideal. Non-Indian azaleas are more susceptible to problems caused by improper pH than are Indian varieties. Soil pH needs to be determined by conducting a soil test. Organic matter additions may modify soil pH, so conduct a soil test after preparing the landscape bed. Many Louisiana soils need to have the pH lowered with elemental sulfur, aluminum sulfate or ammonium sulfate to grow azaleas successfully.

When planting, set the azalea plants in the hole no deeper than they were growing in the original container. If properly mulched, azaleas can be planted even 1 to 2 inches higher than the soil grade of the landscape used.

Fertilization

Azaleas need regular fertilization to perform well. Fertilize azaleas in late winter/early spring with an azalea-camellia fertilizer or a general use ornamental slow-release fertilizer. A recommended fertilizer rate is 1-2 lbs. of nitrogen per 1000 ft² of bed area. Broadcast the fertilizer over the bed area, or divide the fertilizer equally among the plants in the bed. Foliar applications of iron or application of a granular fertilizer containing iron, such as Ironite, may be needed when soil pH leads to deficiencies.

Mulching and Irrigation

Azaleas are a very shallow-rooted plant. If planted “high” in a landscape bed, they must be properly mulched to conserve soil moisture. Excellent mulches for azaleas are pine straw needles, pine straw shavings, cypress mulch and pine bark mulch. Leaves and compost can also be used. A proper mulch not only conserves soil moisture (reducing the frequency and amount of irrigation needed), but also increases the aesthetics of a planting, suppresses weed growth, adds organic matter to the soil and minimizes soil temperature fluctuations.

Irrigate azaleas during dry periods at the rate of 0.5-1.0 inch weekly. It’s best to water infrequently and deeply than to water frequently and shallowly. Be sure to know the quality of irrigation water used on azaleas. Azaleas are sensitive to irrigation water of poor quality — water with undesirable alkalinity, sodium and chlorine levels.

Major azalea pruning should be completed soon after flowering is over in early spring. Remove a small amount of wood annually by thinning out tall spindly canes instead of delaying until more severe pruning is required. Indica-type azaleas generally require more regular pruning than other varieties. Remember to have a reason to prune before beginning.

Diseases and Insects

Insect and disease monitoring and control are essential for beautiful azaleas. Insects and related pests presenting problems on azaleas include lacebugs, spider mites, azalea bark scale and leaf miners. Diseases presenting problems on azaleas include leaf gall, petal blight and root rot. Contact a county agent at your parish office of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service for identification and control recommendations.

Petal Blight

Petal blight is a serious disease problem on azaleas in Louisiana. Affected flowers have small, water-soaked spots. Under favorable environmental conditions, the spots increase in size until they cover the entire flower. Blooms then collapse. Petal blight can be controlled by applying protective fungicides when the flowers are in bloom.

Leaf Gall

Azalea leaf gall is caused by the fungus *Exobasidium*. This common disease causes the leaves or flower parts to become thickened, curled, fleshy and pale green to white or pink. To control, hand pick the galls as soon as they appear. Several fungicides are also labeled for control of leaf gall on azaleas.

Root Rot

Azaleas are very susceptible to root rot. These soil-borne fungi are prevalent whenever internal and surface soil drainage is poor. This is why proper bed preparation is so important. Homeowners have few options for control of root rot once it becomes a major problem. There are varietal differences in response to root rot. Typically, Indian azaleas have the fewest problems, and dwarf, kurume azaleas are the most susceptible.

Spider Mites

Bronzing of older foliage is one of the first indications of a possible spider mite presence. Miticides can be applied at 7- to 10-day intervals for control. Usually fall, followed by late spring, application is recommended.

Bark Scale

Bark scale is found on azaleas along small limbs and in the crotches of the plant. Scales secrete large amounts of honeydew on which a sooty mold fungus grows. Insecticides and summer or dormant oil applications can control bark scale successfully.

Lacebug

Azalea lacebugs are small insects that feed on the underside of the leaves. This feeding results in a mottled discoloration with speckles of a dark excrement. Lacebugs present serious problems in azalea plantings across Louisiana. Infestations usually begin in late winter to early spring, with another infestation typical in late summer.

Leaf Miners

Leaf miners are small insects that roll the margins of the leaves or tunnel between the upper and lower leaf surfaces. It is crucial to control injury just as it begins to occur.

Freeze Injury

Many azaleas suffer from freeze injury during severe winters. The bark will show longitudinal cracks or splitting. Partial or complete girdling of stems may occur. Many times this injury goes unnoticed until May or June when dry weather occurs. The plant then wilts because of insufficient moisture. Select the hardier, better adapted varieties where freeze injury could be a problem. Late spring frost coming when flower buds are nearly ready to open can kill flowers.



Varieties

The most common azaleas grown in Louisiana landscapes are Indian azaleas (*Rhododendron indicum*). A native of Japan, they are characterized by a broad, mounding growth habit. An average mature height is 6 feet x 6 feet, although older, unpruned specimens can easily obtain heights of 10 feet with an equal spread. Flowers of Indian azaleas are usually 2 to 3 1/2 inches across. The table below gives information on the most popular Indian varieties.

Indian Azalea Variety	Comments
<i>Daphne Salmon</i>	Compact grower Salmon pink flowers Medium height Mid-season flowering
<i>Formosa Red</i>	Also called Dixie Beauty A sport of Formosa
<i>Fielder's White</i>	White flowers Spreading growth habit Mid-season flowering
<i>Formosa</i>	Magenta flowers Most popular azalea Very vigorous, upright growth Early flowering
<i>George L. Tabor</i>	Bluish-pink flowers Mid-season flowering
<i>Judge Solomon</i>	Rosy-pink flowers Similar to Formosa Mid-season flowering
<i>Mrs. G.G. Gerbing</i>	Large white flowers A sport of George L. Tabor Spreading growth habit
<i>President Clay</i>	Orange-red flowers Vigorous, upright growth Smaller flowers than other Indian varieties Mid-season flowering
<i>Pride of Mobile</i>	Watermelon-red flowers Vigorous grower Mid-season flowering
<i>Southern Charm</i>	Large, rosy-pink flowers Vigorous grower A sport of Formosa



Kurume azaleas (*Rhododendron kurume*) are typically referred to as dwarf azaleas. They reach heights of 4 to 6 feet, but normally don't reach this size. A more normal size is 3 feet. Kurume azaleas grow slowly and have denser growth than Indian varieties. Flowers are usually 1 1/2 to 2 inches across. The table below gives information on the most popular kurume varieties.

Kurume Azalea Variety	Comments
<i>Christmas Cheer</i>	Bright red flowers Compact growth Mid-season flowering
<i>Coral Bells</i>	Very popular variety Shell-pink flowers Early mid-season flowering
<i>Hershey's Red</i>	Bright red flowers Double flowers Heavy bloomer Mid-season flowering
<i>H.H. Hume</i>	Bright carmine-red flowers Low, mounding growth habit Mid-season flowering
<i>Hinodegiri</i>	Carmine-red flowers Low, mounding growth habit Mid-season flowering
<i>Snow</i>	White flowers Compact growth habit Persistent flowering Mid-season flowering

Later blooming varieties are the satsuki hybrids and related *Rhododendron eriocarpum* species. Satsuki means “fifth month” in Japanese. The satsuki hybrid azaleas flower later in the spring season, usually April and May, than Indian and kurume azaleas. They have larger flowers than kurumes and a low, dense, mounding growth habit. The table below gives information on the most popular satsuki and related varieties.

Satsuki and Related Azalea Varieties	Comments
<i>Gyokushin</i>	Large, white flowers with pink centers Excellent foliage Low, compact growth habit
<i>Pink Gumpo</i>	Large, rosy-pink flowers Small foliage Low, dense growth habit
<i>Pink Macrantha</i>	Large, pink flowers Reddish foliage Old flowers stay on plant
<i>Red Gumpo</i>	Red flowers Later blooming Low, compact growth habit
<i>White Gumpo</i>	White flowers Very late flowering Low, compact growth habit
<i>Hardy Gardenia</i>	Linwood azalea White, gardenia-like flowers Low, spreading growth habit Great white flowering azalea

Other popular azalea groups recommended for landscape plantings in Louisiana are Glenn Dale hybrids, Carla hybrids, Girard hybrids and Robin Hill hybrids.

Glenn Dale hybrids include several hundred varieties developed as “cold hardy” replacements for Southern Indian varieties. Popular Glenn Dale hybrids include Allure (rosy-pink flowers), Copperman (orange-red flowers) and Fashion (salmon to orange-red flowers).

Carla hybrids were released from an azalea breeding program at North Carolina State University (CAR) and the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center (LA). Popular Carla varieties are Carror (semi-double rose pink flowers) and Sunglow (bright red flowers).

Another azalea group developed for improved cold hardiness is the **Girard** hybrids. These compact growers produce single or double flowers in shades of white, red, pink and lavender. Popular Girard hybrids are Hot Shot (orange-red flowers), Sandra Ann (purple flowers) and Unsurpassable (red flowers).

Another azalea hybrid group, the **Robin Hills**, adapt well to the Deep South. They bloom heavily in the fall and also flower in the spring, commonly leading to the

name of “re-blooming” or “multi-seasonal” flowering azaleas. Sir Robert is a popular Robin Hill variety. Its flowers range from white to pink. The most popular Robin Hill variety is Watchet. Watchet produces large 3 1/2-inch flowers that are clear pink and ruffled. Plants are compact and spreading.

The Louisiana chapter of the Azalea Society of America lists azalea varieties that will reliably re-bloom in south Louisiana. These plants bloom in the spring and fall. Recommended azaleas for “multi-seasonal” flowering in Louisiana include Watchet, Chinzan, Fashion, Conversation Piece, Abbott, Allure, Arabesk, Hardy Gardenia, Red Slipper, Sandra Ann, Sekidera, Wendy, Janet Rhea, Dorothy Clark and Dorothy Rees.



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