

Azaleas for the Landscape



Most Mississippi gardens have contained an azalea at some point. Azaleas are in the genus *Rhododendron*, which has more than 900 species. Azaleas are native to many parts of the world, but the most colorful varieties come from China, Japan, and the eastern United States.

There are many characteristics that make the azalea a beloved plant. They flourish with beautiful blooms that can provide an array of colors from mid-spring through early summer. Many varieties also offer colorful fall foliage. With dwarf, intermediate, and large varieties available, gardeners have a wide selection to choose from.

Azaleas are hardy from USDA climate zones 5 to 9. North Mississippi is in zone 7, and the extreme Gulf Coast area is in zone 9, making azaleas hardy throughout the state. All of these attributes make the azalea an excellent plant for Mississippi landscapes.

Planting

Azaleas can be used many ways in the landscape/garden area. They may be used as facer/border plants along a boundary, as background plantings to frame an area, as foundation plantings to build the design around, or in mass-planted groups to brighten up a landscape room.

Where to Plant

Some azaleas can grow in full sun, but most are best suited for a landscape area that has partial shade. This could be on the north side of the house or in a wooded area that receives filtered sunlight through trees. They do best in an acidic soil that has a pH between 4.6 and 6.0. A soil test is the best way to ensure proper soil acidity. Higher pH (greater than 6.0) results in poor growth and insect- and disease-stressed plants.

Azaleas prefer well-drained soil that has an abundant supply of peat moss. If the native soil is poorly drained, you should make raised beds. You can do this with landscape timbers or crossties, or by hilling the soil up 8 to 12 inches above ground level. Azaleas will not tolerate wet feet (roots)!

When to Plant

Most azaleas are container-grown and can be planted any time of the year. However, planting in the fall or early spring allows time for roots to establish before summer heat arrives. Plant bare-root plants during the winter dormant season.

How to Plant

Prepare a planting hole two to three times as wide as the root ball. Set plants in the hole at the same depth or slightly higher than where they grew in the nursery

or container. Backfill with amended soil and water thoroughly. Adding lots of peat moss, leaf mulch, well composted sawdust, or other compost can make the soil more acid, if needed. Finally, mulch the planting site with 3 to 4 inches of a mulch product or 6 to 8 inches of pine straw. Taper the mulch/straw to only 1 inch deep at the base of the plant.

Fertilizing

Have the soil tested and follow the fertilizer recommendations provided. If your soil has not been tested, apply 2 to 4 pounds of an acid-based fertilizer with a 2-1-1 ratio per 100 square feet of bed area. Fertilize individual plants with $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of fertilizer in a uniform circle no closer than 1 foot from the base of the plant. Fertilize in early spring and again in early summer just after plants have finished flowering. Late or over-fertilization can result in little or no flowering, excessive vegetative growth, and possible winter damage if the plants do not harden off.

For more information, see MSU Extension Information Sheet 1977 *A Quick Guide to Fertilizing Mississippi Landscapes*.

Pruning

Azaleas grow and set their bloom buds during the fall months. For this reason, prune them immediately after they have finished their spring bloom period. It is okay to wait until all the azaleas in the landscape have finished blooming to prune them all at once. The best method is to use hand-held pruners and only remove one-third of the overall plant. For more information, see MSU Extension Information Sheet 204 *Pruning Landscape Plants*.

Variety Selection

There are azalea varieties to fit most any landscape situation. Dwarf varieties only grow to 1 to 2 feet tall, large varieties may reach 12 feet, and there are numerous varieties in between.

Three deciduous species grow natively in woodland areas of the state: *Rhododendron canescens*, the pink bush honeysuckle; *R. austrinum*, the yellow bush honeysuckle; and *R. viscosum*, the white swamp azalea.

Most of today's showy azaleas are hybrids. Some of the major groups of cultivated azaleas are Indicas, Kurumes, Glenn Dale hybrids, Girard's, Robin Hill, and the Satsukis. Varieties from the Indica and Kurume groups are grown more commonly throughout the state (Table 1).

The Encore series of azaleas have also gained great popularity in Mississippi landscapes, with more than 25 varieties to choose from. This series is known for producing

Table 1. Common azalea varieties.

Group/Name	Approximate Bloom Date	Flower Color	Approximate Height
Indica			
Brilliant	Early to midseason	Rose	3 to 4 feet
George L. Taber	Midseason	White to pale pink	6 to 8 feet
Mrs. G. G. Gerbing	Early to midseason	White	6 to 8 feet
Judge Solomon	Midseason	Purplish	6 to 8 feet
Formosa	Early to midseason	Rose lavender	6 to 10 feet
Pride of Mobile	Midseason	Watermelon pink	6 to 10 feet
Kurume			
Snow	Midseason	Pure white	1 to 2 feet
Christmas Cheer	Early to midseason	Brilliant red	2 to 3 feet
Hino Crimson	Early	Dark red	2 to 4 feet
Hinodegiri	Midseason	Bright scarlet	3 to 4 feet
Coral Bells	Midseason	Shell pink	3 to 4 feet
Hershey Red	Early	Bright red	3 to 4 feet
Pink Pearl	Early	Soft pink with rose blotch	4 to 6 feet
Satsuki			
Gumpo	Late	White, pink	1 to 3 feet
Higasa	Late	Deep pink	1 to 3 feet
Amagasa	Late	Orange to red	2 to 3 feet
Macrantha	Midseason	Pink, orange, salmon	2 to 3 feet
Wakebishu	Late	Light pink	2 to 3 feet
Glenn Dale			
Fashion	Midseason	Soft orange to rose	4 to 6 feet
Glacier	Midseason	White	4 to 6 feet
Trouper	Early	Orange red	4 to 6 feet
Delaware Valley	Early to midseason	Pure white	4 to 6 feet
Rutherford			
Red Ruffle	Early	Deep red	3 to 4 feet
Pink Ruffle	Midseason	Pink	4 to 6 feet
Robin Hill			
Nancy	Late	Light purple to pink	2 to 3 feet
Conversation Piece	Late	White, pink red	3 feet
Watchet	Late	Red	3 feet
Congo	Late	Vivid purple	3 to 4 feet
Girard			
Rose	Early	Rose-red	2 to 3 feet
Renee Michelle	Late	Clear pink	2 to 3 feet
Pleasant White	Mid- to late season	White	2 to 3 feet
Hot Shot	Midseason	Red	2 to 4 feet
Crimson	Midseason	Crimson	3 feet
Others			
Hardy Gardenia	Midseason	White	2 to 4 feet
Herbert	Early	Purple	3 to 4 feet
Midnight Flare	Midseason	Dark red	4 feet
Sunglow	Midseason	Purplish red	4 to 6 feet

Table 2. Repeat-bloom azalea varieties.

Group/Name	Bloom Form	Flower Color	Approximate Height
ENCORE SERIES			
Pinks			
Autumn Coral	single	coral pink w/fuchsia center	2.5 feet
Autumn Carnival	semi-double	medium pink	3 feet
Autumn Cheer	single	medium pink	3 feet
Autumn Princess	semi-double	salmon-pink	3 to 4 feet
Autumn Sundance	single	deep pink	3 to 4 feet
Autumn Debutante	single	light pink	4 feet
Autumn Empress	semi-double	medium pink	4 feet
Autumn Jewel	single	pink	4 feet
Autumn Rouge	semi-double	light pink	4 feet
Autumn Sweetheart	single to semi-double	soft pink	4 feet
Autumn Carnation	semi-double	medium pink	4 to 5 feet
Autumn Sangria	single	dark pink	4 to 5 feet
Reds			
Autumn Ruby	single	ruby red	2.5 feet
Autumn Bravo	single	red	3 feet
Autumn Embers	semi-double	deep red	3 feet
Autumn Sunset	semi-double	orange-red	4 feet
Autumn Monarch	semi-double	dark peach-orange	5 feet
Purples			
Autumn Lilac	single	lavender-violet	3 to 4 feet
Autumn Amethyst	single	dark lavender	4 feet
Autumn Royalty	single	dark purple	4 to 5 feet
Whites			
Autumn Ivory	single	white	2.5 feet
Autumn Angel	single	pure white	3 feet
Autumn Lily	single	white	4 to -5 feet
Autumn Moonlight	semi-double	white	5 feet
Bi-colors			
Autumn Chiffon	single	light pink w/dark pink center	2.5 feet
Autumn Starlight	single	white w/pink flecks	3 to 4 feet
Autumn Sunburst	single to semi-double	coral pink w/white edges	3 to 4 feet
Autumn Twist	single	white w/purple stripes	4 to 5 feet
Autumn Belle	semi-double	pale pink	5 feet
ReBLOOM SERIES			
Cherry-Pink Prestige	double	cherry pink	1.5 feet
Blush Elegance	single	light pink	2 feet
Fuchsia Extravagance	single	fuchsia	2 feet
Pink Adoration	single	pink	2 feet
Purple Spectacular	single	purple	2 feet
Coral Amazement	triple	coral	2.5 feet
Firebrick Fame	single	red-orange	2.5 feet
Red Magnificance	double	red	3 feet
White Nobility	single	white	3 feet
BLOOM-A-THON SERIES			
White	single	white	3 feet
Pink Double	double	pink	4 feet
Red	single	red	4 feet
Lavender	single	purple	4 feet

flowers in the fall, as well as in the spring. The Re-Bloom series from Greenleaf Nurseries and the Bloom-A-Thon series from Proven Winners are newer releases that should perform well here, also. However, these are newer cultivars that have not been fully tested for adaptation to all of Mississippi (Table 2).

Color and Flower Forms

Azalea flowers have a range of colors, including white, yellow, orange, scarlet, crimson, and purple. There are vivid sparkling shades, pastel tints, and pure whites. Some even have striped or flecked flowers (petals).

The single-flower varieties have five petals with five to ten stamens. Other varieties may be double, semidouble, or the hose-in-hose (funnel) type. Azaleas flower abundantly and if you choose the right varieties, you may have flowers for up to 3 months (see Table 1).

Watering

Azaleas have an extremely fibrous root system that stays relatively shallow. A good watering schedule is essential during the growing season. Azaleas need the equivalent of 1 inch of rain every 7 to 10 days. It is best to water as deeply and infrequently as possible. The timing and amount will depend upon the soil type and drainage. For more information, see MSU Extension Information Sheet 1670 *The Plant Doctor: Watering and Plant Disease*.

Common Diseases and Pests

Petal blight

Flowers become spotted and water-soaked and cling to the plant after they die. It is more severe in cool, moist springs. Remove old mulch and replace. Drench or spray with a fungicide. Unless you have a “hot” compost process, do not compost this material. Remove it well away from the property.

Leaf gall

Pale green or whitish, fleshy galls with curled or deformed leaves. Occurs more in cool, moist weather. Hand-pick and destroy affected leaves. Start spraying at end of bloom period and continue at 2- to 3-week intervals until mid-June.

Leaf spots

Brown/bronzed leaves, with tiny black fruiting bodies on leaves. Use a fungicide at end of bloom period and continue at 2-week intervals through growing season.

Winter injury

Entire branches turn brown and die during the growing season. Look for bark splitting near base of limbs or at ground. Use recommended varieties and keep plants in healthy condition. Water regularly during late summer and fall.

Nematodes

Leaves turn yellow and plants are stunted. They do not respond favorably to water and fertilizer. No chemical control available. Other conditions mimic nematode injury; collect a soil sample from root zone for nematode analysis.

Iron chlorosis

Leaves turn light green to yellow, then creamy white between the veins; but veins remain green. Caused by too high soil pH, making the iron unavailable. Lower soil pH by adding ferrous sulfate, finely ground sulfur, or aluminum sulfate. Treat foliage with iron chelate for temporary effects.

Azalea caterpillar

Causes sudden defoliation of leaves. Usually occurs in late summer or fall and is more common in the southern part of the state. Control with foliar sprays recommended for caterpillars.

Azalea lacebug

Upper surface of leaves has a gray, coarse-stippled appearance. Underside of leaves becomes discolored by excrement and cast skins. Treat with recommended soil-applied insecticides. For heavy infestations, also apply foliar insecticides when crawlers are hatching.

Scale insects

Usually on twigs or branches and have various colors and shapes. Some look like bits of white cotton and others are brownish. Treat with recommended soil-applied insecticides. For heavy infestations, also apply foliar insecticides when crawlers are hatching.

For a list of proper insecticides, see MSU Extension Publication 2369 *Insect Pests of Ornamental Plants in the Home Landscape*.

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