

MAINTENANCE OF AZALEAS AND CAMELLIAS

The blooming season for azaleas and camellias is almost over; there are still a few late bloomers to be admired. To prepare for next winter's and spring's glorious show some attention must be paid to the shrubs now. Although azaleas are Rhododendrons of the Ericaceae family while camellias are of the tea plant or Theaceae family, they have many similar requirements and both grow well in our area, as anyone who has visited the Norfolk Botanical Garden can attest.

Once you purchase new plants and take them home you should select a site for planting with the requirements of the plants in mind. You should have a site that has well drained, acid soil, is out of the wind, and has filtered sunlight or morning sun with shade after 1 p.m. Both species should be well mulched as they both are shallow rooted and *lightly* fertilized with specially formulated fertilizer at planting time. During that first year, both azaleas and camellias should be watered during dry periods to ensure that the roots have sufficient moisture. However, too much moisture, as in poorly drained soil, will cause the plants to die.

For the established azaleas and camellias, a good rule of thumb is to feed and prune immediately after they have finished blooming. When fertilizing the plants use a food specifically designed for acid loving plants and try to select one that is slow release. Follow the directions on the fertilizer to avoid over fertilizing or "burning" the plant with the fertilizer. Pruning the plants after blooming allows the gardener spread the pruning throughout the year and guarantees that the plant has not had time to set buds for the next year. If you have not as yet pruned your azaleas or camellias and they need it, then it is now time to do it.

Pruning

How should a camellia be pruned? They can be pruned fairly severely if needed (up to one third of the foliage) without danger to the shrub. The main pruning technique in keeping established plants healthy and blooming is to keep their superstructure open enough to permit air circulation throughout the plant. Maturing plants may produce an overabundance of twiggy growth that should be removed to prevent disease and harmful insects when there is not sufficient air circulation.

How should azaleas be pruned? Different species of azaleas grow at different rates: some Indicas grow a foot per year while the smaller Gumpo varieties may grow as little as an inch per year. Therefore pruning should conform to the variety and not to a general pattern. Azaleas are not usually considered to be good hedge material, and so should not be sheared, but pruned for an informal effect. They should be pruned out to leave sufficient spacing between the terminal growth and kept low, if desired, by pruning back shoots that grow vertically. Overgrown azaleas will also stand drastic pruning.

Insects and Disease Problems

The three main insect enemies of azaleas are red spider, white fly and lace bugs. Over-wintering broods will hatch about the time the plant is putting on its new growth. Consequently, the best time for treatment or control is immediately after the flowers have fallen. Azaleas planted in full sun or under other types of stress are often more susceptible to these pests. Newer research shows having a high population of beneficial insects may reduce the damage caused by the lace bugs, red spiders, or white fly pests. Having different plants mixed with the azaleas helps to encourage these populations of beneficial insects and is a good idea for the home landscape. Some Azaleas are subject to leaf gall, which appears as swollen white growth instead of normal leaves. The disease is best controlled by picking off the affected portions when first noted and disposing by putting them in the trash. **DO NOT ALLOW THEM TO BE COMPOSTED.**

Camellias are subject to scale insects and if found on the plant should be treated appropriately. One disease, camellia petal blight, may be serious. This disease turns the whole blossom an ugly brown. Your best control option is basic sanitation around the plant. Pick up the fallen blossoms and all infected blossoms from the plant and dispose of them in a covered trash bin. **DO NOT ALLOW THEM TO BE COMPOSTED**

Both azaleas and camellias will give the gardener years of pleasure when planted correctly, in a site that meets their growth requirements and if they are given a modicum of care in terms of fertilizing, pruning and treating for insects and disease.

For more information you can contact the Chesapeake Master Gardeners located in the Chesapeake Office of Virginia Cooperative Extension, 310 Shea Drive in the Chesapeake Municipal Center off of Cedar Rd. This office has information on many different plants and answers for other gardening questions that you may have. Contact us at the Chesapeake Agriculture office, phone number 382-6348, by e-mail at gardener@agri.chesapeake.city.va.us.