

The Potting Shed is a free monthly newsletter from the University of Georgia Extension in Bryan County. We provide science-based information to help Coastal Georgia gardeners. Have a question or need help, contact your local County Extension Office.
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Hints For Healthy Azaleas

This unusual warm/cold weather may be causing a problem with our azaleas. Their fine fibrous roots like well-drained, but moist soils. A summer drought, followed by a wet autumn, can damage these fine roots. Azaleas do not like very wet or very dry soils or full sun locations. Azaleas are somewhat temperamental.

It is a normal process for an azalea to lose some of its leaves. The older leaves die and younger ones replace them. You need only be concerned if most of the leaves on the plant are yellow.

Lace bugs can make azalea leaves look speckled or silvery. This insect hatches early in spring as the new foliage begins to mature and its numbers may build to damaging levels with successive generations. Lace bugs reach their peak in late summer and do their worst in sunny, exposed sites. Spiders are important predators of lace bugs and since the spiders shy away from sunny, hot places, plant your azaleas where there is some shade. Insecticidal soap, horticultural oil, or a systemic insecticide may spare your azaleas some damage if applied in spring when the first hatchlings are noticed.

An iron deficient azalea will have yellow or white younger leaves. The leaf will be yellow with green veins. You need to add a chelate iron product to the soil at the labeled rate. If the iron deficiency returns quickly or repeatedly, the azalea may have root injury or the soil pH may be too high (pH range should be 5-5.8).

Nitrogen-deficient azaleas will shed older leaves. Azaleas may have missed their last fertilization in July or August or just never took up the fertilizer available. Don't worry about these plants. They should bloom normally in the spring. Fertilize them after the danger of frost is past - about April 1.

Plant azaleas in well-drained soils in partially shaded locations. The shade provided by planting them next to a building is not always enough shade. If they must be planted in the sun, they prefer the morning sun. Plant azaleas in slightly raised beds, if possible, and plant them no deeper than they originally grew.



The roots may be pot-bound when you buy them. This is a condition where the roots are tightly matted together. Pot-bound roots form a tough ball that the roots may never grow out of. Cut or break the roots down four sides of the root ball if the plant is pot bound. Spread the roots out as you add soil.

Plant azaleas in beds, if possible, and not individual holes dug in the ground. Till the area well. It is not essential to add compost to the soil (but if you are going to spend the money for plants why not do the job right). I like adding compost in South Georgia. Put a three-inch mulch over the entire bed after planting. Water the soil well to settle the roots. Plant in fall and winter for best results.

Proper planting *and* watering are critical steps in assuring success in growing azaleas. Azaleas must be watered during the first year. Water the soil to keep it moist, but not wet, for the first six months. After that, water when soil dries out, wetting the soil to a depth of twelve inches. Water three-quarter to one inch a week during drought conditions. After plants are established, please understand that frequent watering can also kill your azaleas.

What to do in February.....February is considered by many to be the best time to graft Camellias in Southeast Georgia. Also continue to remove spent blooms from under your bushes. If some of your bushes have finished blooming you might want to change the mulch at this time. Some people start air layering their bushes during February with good success. Air layering camellias from February to May works very well here.



January - February

When it's wet, cold and dark for 14 hours a day, gardening is not generally a high priority, BUT plants still need some attention. Leaves must be removed (mulched, mowed or raked up) from the grass. Deciduous trees (oak, maple, cypress) and summer blooming shrubs (roses, crape myrtles, hydrangea) should be pruned. Bare-rooted or container grown fruit and nut trees can be planted. The weather is perfect for moving plants that need to be relocated in your landscape. And finally, seeds for summer flowers or vegetable gardens can be ordered.

Annual Flowers

An annual plant completes its life cycle in one growing season. It germinates, grows to maturity, blooms, sets seed and dies. The seed formation is what triggers the plants decline. Removing faded flowers, "deadheading", prevents seed formation, promotes heavy flowering and prolongs the plant's life. Cool weather does not seem to bother the germination of some seeds. You can still sow seeds of sweet pea, California poppy, nasturtium, larkspur and stock in well-prepared flowerbeds. These winter annuals grow best during mild winters and tender new growth may need some protection during freezing temperatures. Fertile, well-drained soil (but with ample moisture) and full sun are key ingredients for success.

If you're not much on pampering plants, then California poppy, *Eschscholzia californica*, or nasturtium, *Tropaeolum majus*, may be the cool- season annuals for you. There are a few stipulations. They both prefer sandy, poorer soil (rich soil inhibits bloom), and ample moisture ONLY during seedling stage. After that, they both prefer drought conditions. This is probably the reason that poppies do well as wildflower plantings on roadway medians. The orange colored poppy is the original wild version. Cultivated varieties with pink, cream, violet and crimson blossoms are also available. Nasturtiums tend to create a rather untidy mound but add a conspicuous prize to any garden. Edible, spurred orange, yellow, gold or scarlet blossoms are nestled among round leaves.

If your flowerbed needs a tall border, then try planting rocket larkspur, *Consolida ambigua*, or stock, *Matthiola incana*. They both have upright, column type stems of fragrant flowers that are great for cutting. Both have antique colored blossoms of pink, blue, peach and lavender. The larkspur foliage is lacy and dark green, while the stock has larger, strap like, gray-green leaves.

Most garden centers will have annual flowers still available in pint-sized containers during January and February. These are perfect for filling in the empty gaps in your flowerbed or adding a fresh look to patio and porch containers. Many of the annuals listed above will be available. Plus, look for calendula, sweet alyssum and hollyhocks. Remember to feed established pansies, snapdragons, ornamental cabbage and kale plants with an immediate release complete fertilizer (no 0's in the three numbers).

Bulbs

Bulbs are basically storage tanks for plants that go dormant during cold or hot weather in order to survive. Bulbs are sold during the dormant state. The spring blooming bulbs are on SALE right now. While shopping for bargains, make sure that the bulbs are still viable. Select ones that are firm, large and free of blemishes. Bulbs such as Iris, crocus, snowdrop, grape hyacinth, daffodils and jonquils can still be planted to create drifts of color. Remember: Bulbs produce the best show when planted in large numbers.

Fruit Trees

Most fruit trees/shrubs/vines will grow in Georgia. Some are very labor intensive due to our large insect populations and the plant's susceptibility to disease. The easiest fruits to grow are blueberry, fig, Oriental persimmon and blackberry. Muscadine, pecan, strawberry and pear are considered moderately hard to grow. Peach, apple and plum are the most difficult. When I say "hard to grow", I am referring to a plentiful yield of edible fruit with minimum human activity (spraying, watering, pruning, etc.).

Winter is the best time to prune fruiting plants. Before pruning Muscadine vines, you should understand that fruit clusters are formed on new growth, which only arises from last year's wood. You cannot strip the entire trunk and get fruit this year. The vine's lateral arms (cordons) are normally trained on a trellis. Cut back all previous summer shoot growth off of the cordons, BUT leave a 4-inch long vertical branching fruiting arm (spur) every 6-inches on the cordon. The spurs will have 2-3 vegetative buds on each. These buds are where new growth and berry clusters will occur this spring. Pruning Muscadine vines for the first time is very intimidating, but you must be aggressive.

Pear and apple trees are pruned to a modified central leader. This means that you tier or stair step the branches, but keep the overall height shortened. If the fruit is out of ladder range, then the tree is too tall.

Peach and plum trees are pruned to an open center. The branches that are growing straight upward should be removed. Once again a tier or scaffolding effect is what you're looking for. After pruning, the overall tree shape should look like an opened, upside down umbrella.

Lawns

Fall leaves must be removed either by raking or mulching with your mower. If you planted winter ryegrass, mow it regularly. Now is an excellent time to fill in those low areas that are holding water. Try to level out areas that always get scraped bare by the lawn mower. Put out a pre-emergence herbicide to control early germinating weeds such as crabgrass, goose grass, clover, henbit and chickweed.

If you were going to start a new lawn this year, then begin preparing in late February. Get yards of organic matter or soil conditioner delivered. Generally, you want at least 5 inches of organic matter spread over the entire surface. Then, till it in when the soil is relatively dry. Do not till when you can squeeze water out of a handful of soil. Tilling on wet ground is worst than doing nothing. It destroys and compacts the soils structure. The most important task is to get a soil analysis to determine lime and fertilizer recommendations.

Trees & Shrubs

Be on the lookout for hard and soft bodied scale insects on the back of evergreen leaves and on plant stems. Spray with a dormant oil to smother them. If you need added control then spray the next time with an insecticide.

Trim and shape up evergreens. Cut out the dead wood in your flowering shrubs. Prune shrubs that bloom during the summer (after May), such as Abelia, barberry, Buddleia, smokebush, Rose of Sharon, crape myrtle, oleander, tea roses, Clethra (summersweet), old fashion hydrangea (not oak leaf or big leaf variety) and summer-flowering varieties of Spirea.

Native Plant of the Month

If your landscape literally "stinks", your problem may be Stinkhorns. Stinkhorns are a saprophytic fungus that smell like rotted meat. It's their foul odor that motivates residents to seek advice on control measures. But with the exception of the objectionable smell, stinkhorns are really not a problem.

The stinkhorn fungus is a decomposer and is considered beneficial because it helps breakdown decaying plant material.

Our environment provides a perfect home for mushroom-producing fungi. Southeast Georgia receives around fifty plus inches of rain each year. Plus we have high humidity and warm, mild temperatures most of the year. And we have a wealth of decaying plant material.

Stinkhorn fungi start as white, egg-like structures that are anchored to the soil by a root-like network. Only the top of the egg-like structure can be seen. Most of the "egg" is underground.

Various insects, including flies, are attracted to the scent of stinkhorn mushrooms. Flies feed on the spore slime. After dining they depart with their legs and other body parts covered with spores which they disseminate throughout the environment.

Most people tell me the mushrooms are growing in areas where they have used wood mulch. Mushrooms from the stinkhorn fungus are produced during cool, moist weather (fall through spring).

Here are some stinkhorn management options.

Learn to live with them as they are beneficial to the soil ecology in this area. Keep windows closed during periods of mushroom production to minimize the odor problem.

Hand-pick the "egg" stage before it ruptures and put it in a zip-lock bag in the garbage. Small or new colonies may be eradicated through complete removal of the mulch to the native soil. No guarantees with this method.

Use of non-mulch ground covers, such as ivy, jasmine, liriop, mondo grass, etc., will serve to reduce stinkhorn incidence in a landscape. There are no legal, effective, or practical chemical control options.

