

# Blue Mountain Nurseries

## Growing Azaleas

Azaleas are easy care plants requiring little maintenance and they offer a magnificent splash of colour in the winter and spring garden. Their showy, exuberant displays take centre stage in just about any landscape. Colours are available in pink, white, red, yellow, cream, mauve, blue, purple, and orange and are stunning in groups. They associate well with other plants that enjoy similar conditions: ie Maples, Dogwoods and Magnolias, Camellias, Pieris, Daphnes and small woodland bulbs and Perennials.

Evergreen azaleas originate from Japan, whereas the deciduous azaleas are more widespread being found in China, Japan, Korea, southern Russia and North America.

Azaleas have one flower per stem, but the shrub produces so many stems that the shrub appears to be covered in blossoms.

They are also mainly very hardy and only the harshest of frost will damage them.

There are 3 types of Azaleas.

**Azalea indica** is the most well-known of the evergreen azaleas. They flower from late winter to early summer and will grow in wide range of habitats including coastal and cooler inland areas. They offer large flowers, small leaves and grow from 60cm to 1.2 metres in height.

**Kurume azaleas** are evergreen with small leaves. Small single or semi double flowers smother the plant in spring. Kurume azaleas can tolerate cooler temperatures and require less shade than the indica varieties. They grow from 60cm to 1 metre in height.

**Mollis azaleas** are hybrids from controlled crosses, initially between the Chinese and Japanese azaleas but are now pretty mixed in their genetics. They are cold tolerant and more forgiving of less than ideal soil conditions, particularly wetter and heavier ground. They have highly coloured foliage through autumn and lose their leaves in winter (deciduous). Flowers appear before the foliage in spring. Some varieties are fragrant. They prefer a cooler climate and will grow in full sun to a height of 1.5 metres.

## Soil preparation and Planting

Azaleas are stunning planted in groups, in mixed borders or in front of evergreen shrubs or under deciduous trees.

Azaleas can be planted at any time of year so long as they are well watered through the summer months but ideally, plant in winter and early spring before flowering takes place.

In their natural habitat, azaleas grow under a forest or woodland canopy, so seek to replicate this with a site that is in semi shade or filtered sunlight. The mollis azaleas will tolerate full sun, so check which type you have.

Azaleas need well aerated and highly organic soil. Before planting, water the plant well and let it sit prior to planting. Prepare the site by digging in organic material and a slow release fertilizer. We make and use our own mulch and all purpose mixes- you can buy by the bag at \$9.99 or \$27 for 3 bags.

The prepared site should be a hole that is 2 times the width of the pot and at least a good spades length deep. Taking the plant from the pot, tease out the roots or carefully run a sharp knife down the length of the root ball to encourage new roots to grow. Be careful to plant the Azalea at the same level as it was in the pot. Azaleas are surface rooted planting too deep will kill the fine root hairs. Place in the hole and gently firm the soil around the root ball. Form a raised ring around the plant to create a well where water can go where it is needed most. Water well and finally mulch around the base with organic mulch but keeping away from the main stem.

## Watering and Feeding

Azaleas are shallow rooters, so take care when watering, weeding, or feeding. Apply a slow release fertilizer once flowering has finished and new growth starts to help with next season's flower development. Azaleas need plenty of water when new growth appears and after flowering has finished. It is better to water deeply rather than applying a light sprinkle.

## Mulching and pruning

Azaleas prefer moist and cool roots which can be achieved with mulching. Apply a 2cm layer of mulch in late winter and summer (January) and ensure to keep mulch away from base of the main stem to prevent rot and pests.

Azaleas with a natural compact growth habit do not need to be pruned.

If you would rather not, you don't have to de-head or prune! If you decide to, azaleas are deadheaded in spring or summer, after they bloom. Deadheading spent flowers prevents the plant from putting all its energy into forming seed heads and ensures your azaleas put all their energy toward creating buds for next year's flowers.

To deadhead, look for a spot between the new leaves and the old flower stem. Place your fingers just under the dead azalea flower. Avoid the forming buds which resemble small brown knobs; these are new growth buds and if you remove them, your azalea may not flower next year. Twist or bend to snap off the spent azalea blooms. You can use clean pruners if the azalea resists deadheading by hand. Put the spent flowers in

your wheelie bin- don't throw them on the ground around the azalea as this can potentially spread disease.

Azaleas typically set next year's flower buds by mid to late summer. Pruning branches after the buds are set will remove next year's flowers so prune once it has done blooming and all the dead flowers have been removed. Late summer or autumn pruning is not recommended as the new growth may not be hardened off before the first frosts and may be damaged.

Evergreen azaleas can be pruned for hedges or borders. Unlike rhododendrons, evergreen azaleas can be pruned each year after flowering to create a densely-shaped plant.

Deciduous azaleas can be cut anywhere on the stem and they will branch from that point, though they should not be pruned as severely as evergreen azaleas. Pinching or pruning the new growth can induce branching.

## Pests and Diseases

While these attractive shrubs are generally hardy and problem free, they are occasionally bothered by pests and diseases.

Throw blooms or leaves that may be diseased in a bag and dispose of in your wheelie bin. Azaleas with leaf spot fungus have dark brown or red spots on the leaves; plants with wilt fungus have shrivelled leaves.

Root & Crown Rot- the fungus *Phytophthora* causes one of the most common disease problems rhododendron and azaleas. This fungus is a "water mould," and thrives in poorly drained or wet conditions. A wilted plant is usually the first sign of trouble.

Powdery mildew can be a problem in some Azalea. Planting in a more open site will help control it. You can spray in November and again in January with spraying sulphur to prevent powdery mildew.