



Organic Care for Azaleas

Root and Soil Health - Azaleas and their roots require a high organic content in the soil to provide for moisture retention and adequate aeration. That being said the following are examples of care the azaleas at Bayou Bend receive.

Mulch. Decomposed pine bark or hard wood mulches are very popular mulches for the landscaped yard and lawn crews throughout Houston. They provide a reasonable insulated layer for root systems but provide little else for soil health. Mulching with compost or Pine Straw on the other hand not only gives insulation it also provides organic matter to the soil more quickly, which benefits the plant and the soil the same season applied. Bayou Bend is mulched with organic compost with a 3" thick layer every year. Compost benefit soil by providing better drainage, moisture retention, increased mycorrhizae activity, root growth and many more. So the quicker organics are in the soil the healthier your plants will be.

Molasses. To increase the number of mycorrhizae in the soil and to provide sugar for the plant molasses is added. Every six to eight weeks the azaleas are sprayed with *Molasses*. (1 oz. of molasses to 1 gallon of water.) You may use *Horticultural Molasses* or *Black Strap Molasses*. By doing this you will provide the soil and the plant with needed carbon.

Fertilizer. Fertilize azaleas after pruning in April or early May. Only fertilize with low salt fertilizers. Salts in synthetic fertilizers kill living organisms in the soil resulting in poor soils and a dependence on the synthetic fertilizer. I fertilize with *Alfalfa pellets*, about 2 - 3 handfuls per plant, the first of April. Alfalfa is a good source of nitrogen that is slowly released into the soil. Next I use Micro Life a product of San Jacinto Environmental Supply. This is a balanced organic fertilizer providing the same nutrients as a synthetic. I also apply this at 2 - 3 handfuls per plant. You may fertilize your azaleas once more in June if you feel the need, be sure not to fertilize too late into the year this can have a damaging effect on the azalea.

Foliage Health - The secret here is that when you have healthy soils you will have a healthy plant. Azaleas prefer to grow in part shade. I am not saying that azaleas do not grow in the sun or shade but an azalea growing in part shade can overcome stress with more efficiency.

The foliage of your Azalea will be the indicator of problems with the plant. Be mindful of color, size, or damage of the leaves.

Insect control - Over the years many organic products have been introduced for the control of insects, many of these products have proven to be less effective than others. The two products that I have found to be the most beneficial for me are *Soybean Oil and Orange Oil*. (Both of these products are mixed at *1 oz. per gallon of water*.)

Lace bug is the number one pest found on Azaleas in Houston. To avoid population of this insect from infesting your azaleas several precautions need be taken.

Always avoid planting azaleas in full sun. It has been my observation that Lace bugs prefer a plant in the full sun. This may be because that plant is usually stressed resulting in conditions which natural defenses can not overcome, such as sap flow or thickness of cell walls.

Stressed plants weather in the sun or the shade attracts lace bug. It is just as important to fix the reason why the azalea was stressed as it is getting rid of the Lace bug. Simple removing the insect will only solve your problem temporarily; the lace bugs will be back.

The lace bug will lay their eggs on the leaves of the azaleas to over winter. To prevent future lace bugs from eating the azalea remove the leaves from beneath the plants to decrease populations in the spring.

These three suggestions should help to prevent damaging population on your azaleas.

As an organic gardener it is important to realize that you may always have some insects on your plants. By taking precautions in the beginning you will control the problem insects for the long term.

Fungal Control - Fungi is more of a problem than insects at times. I have had many different experiences with the fungi that use Azaleas as a host.

I had a small outbreak of Lace Bugs on a group of azaleas in the Clio Garden. So I fixed a sprayer full of *K-neem Oil* and sprayed the azaleas with the problem. Several days later I returned to spray the same azaleas with a fungicide to get rid of the Powdery mildew and the rust. Much to my surprise the rust had vanished and the mildew was a lot less noticeable. I had found an organic solution to some of my fungi problems. I now spray *K-neem Oil* only for fungi and no longer for insect control. Other things that I have found to work are *Corn Meal* for *Phytophthora Root Rot*, and a Milk dilution for *Petal Blight*. Most importantly remember that a healthy soil will control most fungi problems so you don't have to.

These recommendation are what we use at Bayou Bend.

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