

Caring for a Potted Azalea

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December brings ice-white chrysanthemums, turned-back cyc lamens, and pointy-leaved poinsettias to the florist's window. These winter bloomers look beautiful now, but it will be next to impossible to bring them round again. A forced azalea, however, is a long-lived specimen. Give this small shrub with its pretty, fluted flowers and dark evergreen leaves the care it needs, and it will bloom each winter for many years to come.

Pick out an azalea with lots of flower buds beginning to show color. Pass up those with tight, unbroken buds, or those in full bloom. The former may never open and the latter's blooms will go by before long. The breaking buds may drop their light-brown scales on the surface of the soil, which is fine, but beware of peat littered with yellow leaves, which may indicate that the plant has been poorly watered.

A healthy azalea has dark-green leaves without any cob webby strands left by red spider mites, which lurk on the under leaves. When not in bloom, the plant benefits from an occasional mild bath in slightly soapy water, followed by a clear, lukewarm rinse to wash off intruding mites.

1. When in bloom, the azalea doesn't need fertilizer. Pinch off the fading blossoms and the whorls of lighter-green new shoots that appear before the blooming period is over.

If you purchase your azalea on a cold day, be sure to swaddle it in paper before you leave the shop, to protect it from freezing. Many indoor azaleas will not be hardy in the colder climates of the temperature zone.

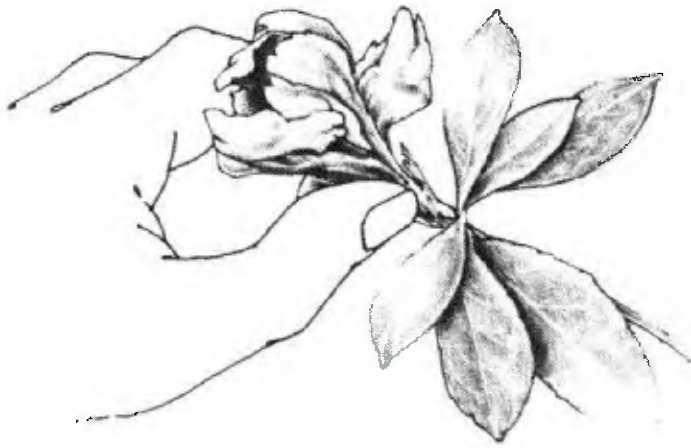
Like other *Rhododendron* species, a florist's azalea likes an acid potting medium and good drainage. It needs at least four hours of bright, indirect sun every day, and cool room temperatures. Night temperatures ranging between 40 and 55 degrees Fahrenheit with day temperatures not higher than 68 are generally considered ideal for an azalea grown indoors.

2. When all the blooms have gone by, prune the leaves and branches lightly to shape. Take off about an eighth of the length of old branches, cutting just above a side shoot.



Keep the azalea on the warm side of the range to force the buds open, and to encourage new roots just after repotting. Keep it on the cool side of these temperatures before setting it out in spring and after bringing it indoors in fall.

The blooms should last from two to four weeks. The warmer the room, the briefer the season of bloom. Keep the plant out of warm drafts and direct sunlight. A tray of pebbles filled with water and placed under the pot will improve humidity. Water the azalea regularly. It is a fibrous and shallowly rooted plant,



and will not tolerate drought for long. An extremely dried-out azalea with limp, drooping leaves should be immersed in water until air bubbles cease, then drained and returned to the window sill. Check your azalea daily to see if it needs water. Heft the pot; the heavier it is, the wetter the soil. With a clay azalea pot, the cooler the pot feels and the darker its color, the damper the potting medium is. Look at the azalea's trunk; the water line on it should be visible about half an inch above the level of the medium. Finally, touch the soil. It should be neither dusty nor sod den but cool and damp.



Pruning encourages new floral and vegetative growth.

3. About every other year, the azalea should be root-pruned as well. Remove it from its pot, and with a clean sharp stick crumble away some of the peaty medium from the top and sides of the root ball. An indoor azalea should be slightly pot-bound, but unless you free up the roots from time to time they will strangle the plant. With the stick or a knife, sever any roots that are girdling the root ball and take out any dying roots. Pick out pieces of crockery that have become entangled in the bottom of the root ball



Lightly prune all around to invigorate old roots and encourage new ones.

4. This first year, pot the azalea on, into a pan an inch wider at the top. (An azalea pan is a clay or plastic pot that is 1½ times wider than its height. Its shallow shape accommodates the azalea's roots better than a standard pot can.) Add some new crocks and medium at the bottom of the pot, and with the stick pack in more firmly around the entire root ball. Hereafter, don't move the azalea into a bigger pot unless the root ball is crowded—perhaps only every two to four years. The spotting medium should be about 1 part peat, 1 part sand, and 1 part leaf mold.

5. In spring after the frosts are past, plunge the azalea up to its pot's neck in a protected (indirect light or dappled shade) spot in the garden—under a tree, say, nestled in among English ivy. It should not receive direct sun. A light bark mulch over the soil surface will help retain moisture in the root ball. Check it every day and see to its watering needs. Fertilize about once a month, with a 4-12-4 formulation of azalea fertilizer if possible. The organic fertilizer Electra is also good. Twist the pot every now and then to keep its roots from striking out into the surrounding garden.



During prolonged damp spells, azaleas in the garden may get gall. Azalea galls are waxy, whitish or light-green blisters that grow on the leaves. They can be as small as a peppercorn or as big as the end of your thumb. Ripe, they burst and send forth plumes of white spores, like so much chalk dust. The disease spreads quickly from one plant to another; all galls should be cut off and destroyed as soon as found. If you can't stop the infestation this way, spray with a fungicide like ferbam or zineb.



The azalea may need a little less water after flowering, but continue to check it daily. After repotting, it will send up more new growth, which should be left to grow, as it will produce next year's flowers.

Before autumn's first frost, bring the azalea in and stop feeding it. It should have set some soft incipient flower buds; they need cool nights and warmer days to develop. A cool hallway, breezeway, cold pit, cold frame, or cloche can provide the proper environment. When the buds are full, bring the azalea into a slightly warmer room to encourage them to break.



Illustrations by Ray Maher