

Azalea Care in the Fall

By Charles A. Andrews III—Cumming, Georgia

Gardening wise, we tend to slack off by the time fall begins. Yet, there are several tasks to consider for this time of year. Here are two.

First is to make sure your azaleas and other plants are still well mulched. We all know this but sometimes it becomes a low priority. Natural mulch needs to be replaced because it slowly decays, putting organic matter back into the soil. Mulching conserves water, helps keep the soil from compacting, and protects the roots in winter. Coarse pine bark and pine straw are two excellent mulches. There are many others. Two or three inches is best. Make sure the mulch is kept a few inches off the shoots and trunks. You do not want a nice cozy home for insects next to your azalea trunks.

Next is planting. For much of the country, fall is the absolute best time to plant. Except in the areas where the ground freezes deeply, fall planting gives azaleas and other plants significant time to establish roots before the hot days of summer begin. Many nursery plants do not survive when planted in late spring, especially if planted in poorly prepared holes and when they have a poorly developed root system. Nursery plants are often on a hi-octane fertilizer diet, will look healthier than they are, and may not be ready to be weaned from the bottle. Unfortunately, most people only visit nurseries in the spring when many plants are in bloom, and even if some azaleas bloom in summer or later, nurseries and garden shops do not carry many plants at these times because there are so few customers.

If you are in a mild climate area, consider adopting a fall-planting regimen. A raised bed of fine pine bark can hold over small plants throughout the summer, and with a soaker hose and a couple of light applications of fertilizer during spring and summer, the plants will grow amazing roots. In the meantime, you can prepare nice, wide, well-amended planting holes ahead of time, ready for the plants come fall.

The “Western Azalea”

Deciduous azalea *Rhododendron occidentale* is often called the “Western Azalea” because it is the only deciduous azalea to thrive in the West: “*Rhododendron occidentale* is distributed within the Coast Ranges of California, the Klamath Ranges of northern California and southern Oregon, the Sierra Nevada, and the Peninsular Ranges of southern California.”¹ While it can withstand, and regrow, after wild fires, it cannot live in the hot humid-night areas where our other southeastern American deciduous azaleas thrive. However, because of its natural fragrance and genetic makeup it has been used in hybridization of very colorful azalea hybrid groups, including the Knap Hill and Exbury azaleas, since the late 1800s. Please see photo on page 69.

References and Notes

- 1 Hrusa, Fred. “Morphological and Isoenzyme Variation in *Rhododendron Occidentale* (Western Azalea) (Section *Pentanthera*, *Ericaceae*). *Madroño*. 2012. 59(3): 128–142.
- 2 An important resource for researching genetic makeup of azaleas (and rhododendrons) of all groups, is the <https://www.hirstum.info> website. Thanks to Richard (“Red”) Cavender of Red’s Rhodies in Sherwood, Oregon, for assistance in providing this information and photos of *R. occidentale* azaleas that he and others have hybridized.
- 3 More information is also available on the ASA website at: <https://www.azaleas.org/deciduous-azaleas/the-white-group/>

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