

## *Garden Inspirations*

### **Azaleas....Not so scary after all!**

**By Joe Covington**

Every season I hear the same story, “Azaleas are too hard to grow”, or “Azaleas won’t grow in this part of the country.” The truth is, there are plants you can just dig a hole, plop them in, and in two years you’ll be figuring a way to keep them from getting too big! So if this is the performance you desire in your garden, STOP READING NOW! Azaleas are capable of a high-risk reward upside, but you can’t cheat on giving them what they need, so let’s first talk about what Azaleas really like in order to be “happy”.

Azaleas need to be kept moderately moist all the time. If they stay soggy – wet too long, they’ll die! If they get bone-dry one time, they’ll die! So this seems impossible, right? Definitely not! Here’s how: plant the root balls 1-1½ inches higher than ground level so that you can water freely to frequently. Watering every day will be necessary when temperatures rise in the Northeast Texas summers. Brief 3-5 minute waterings (with sprinklers set to come on 2-3 times a day, 8 hours apart) seem to work well for keeping soil moderately moist and at the same time creating humidity which protects Azaleas from “browning up” in our dry, hot summers.

Next let’s talk about a reliable planting mix. No heavy clay soil in the backfill....None! A combination of peat moss, compost, decomposed pine bark, and expanded shale is a great, tested mix for optimum success. Four to six inches of this mix should surround the root ball. Some folks like to mix in Texas Greensand, an organic source of acidity, with the mix, but be sure you have that root ball 1-1½ inches higher than the flower bed grade, then mound “the mix” over the ball and top it off with shredded mulch (hardwood, cedar or cypress) to keep the sloping mixture in place. Azalea Planting Mix, endorsed by the Dallas Chapter of the Azalea Society of America, is available at local garden centers.

Assuming you have planted your azaleas in part shade, you are now ready to enjoy your “impossible” azaleas for years to come! Oh yeah...Encore Azaleas bloom 3-4 times per year with huge flowers that make your risk worth the reward!

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