

Native Azalea Species

Rhododendron ssp.

By Dorothy G. Swift

There are a number of different native azalea species, as described by Sally Perkins in *WildfloraRI*. Several of them, such as *Rhododendron prinophyllum*, *R. perichlymenoides* and *R. viscosum* grow naturally within our region, while a number of others have a more southern distribution. The rhodora, *R. canadense*, is native here also. Almost all of the native azalea species, all of which are deciduous shrubs, are hardy enough to grow here. While a few of these may require special circumstances, many of them grow well in the general set of conditions described here.

(Exceptions: *R. canadense* definitely prefers wet conditions and grows best further north. If you want to grow it in RI, you will need to find a damp or wet location with enough shade to avoid summer heat, yet sufficient light to allow flower buds to form. *R. calendulaceum*, from the mountains further south, definitely does not like wet conditions, but the general conditions given here should work. *R. occidentale* from the west coast is almost impossible to grow on the east coast).

Exposure: Light shade or partial shade is probably the preferred condition. Many can withstand full sun, but may require extra watering in the summer. A number of azalea species bloom in summer, rather than spring, so a location with some shade results in flowers that will last longer. Excessive shade is to be avoided. A woodland garden or a wooded area that is filled with many flowering shrubs, such as native azaleas, needs to be managed so that the shade from larger trees does not gradually become too dense.

Soil: The main requirement is an acid soil. This is the natural condition in our region unless the soil has been heavily limed for other horticultural purposes. The soil should be rich in organic matter and have particles that are large enough and irregular enough to allow good drainage and space for air. Addition of organic material will improve both heavy soil and sandy, fast-draining soil. I dig a generous planting hole and remove the rocks and roots that are present. I prepare the soil mixture by adding compost to the planting hole. Your own compost is fine, but there are also many fine bagged organic compost products on the market. Commercial growers tend to use shredded pine bark in container mixes to allow fast drainage and also make air spaces. I also add a small amount of superphosphate, a mineral. Our New England soils are not rich in phosphate; superphosphate dissolves very slowly, and it will become available to support blossoming in future years. Do not add fertilizer at planting time.

Mulch: An organic mulch of about two to three inches of pine needles, shredded pine bark, or chopped oak leaves is desirable. (Mixed wood chips will work if the preferred materials are not readily available, due to an extensive area of plantings or budget limitations. But the breakdown of the chips will take nutrients from the soil, so provision must be made to restore them). The mulch is placed on top of the root zone, where it will help the soil hold moisture and keep weeds out of the root zone. The mulch will ultimately break down and feed the soil and plant. Just keep it an inch or two away from the stem or trunk of the azalea plant. This keeps excessive moisture, which could allow fungi to invade

Family: Ericaceae



the plant, away from the stem. It also prevents giving a hiding place to mice that might tunnel in to damage the bark by gnawing on it in winter. Replenish the mulch every few years as needed.

Height of planting: The top of the root system, whether the plant came from a container, was acquired balled and burlapped, or was dug from elsewhere in your garden to transplant, should remain even with the ground level. (No soil or planting mix should ever be placed on top of the root area, or cover up the original root ball top). It is permissible to set the top of the root ball slightly elevated above the surrounding soil, if it seems that the planting mix is likely to settle after planting. (If slow drainage or unworkable soil is a problem, many people plant on top of the natural soil level, making a bed of azaleas with suitable planting mix surrounding root balls that are placed on the natural soil surface and then mulched. Before you do this, though, conduct more thorough research into the technique).

Root system: Azaleas have a shallow, delicate, fibrous root system. There will be no tap root, just a lot of smaller roots. Azaleas can readily be moved, most easily in April or September, but you must take an appropriate root ball that includes the soil containing most of the roots. Vertically cut a circle in the root zone, approximately the same width as the branches. Then dig under and lift up. (Obviously, this is a major project with a large plant, but quite simple with smaller ones).

Potbound container plants: If you are planting a container-grown azalea, there are some special precautions to take. If the roots are dense and circle the container, they should be cut. Take a knife, and make about four vertical cuts around the outside of the root area starting about two inches below the top and continuing down to the bottom. Also slice across the bottom of the root ball. If you purchase a container-grown plant that is completely potbound, then “butterfly” the root system: from the bottom of the root mass, make one cut across the whole root mass about two-thirds of the way towards the top. Then spread the two root sections horizontally apart when planting. Cover the root areas, but not the original top, with suitable planting mix.

Watering: New plantings need to be carefully watered the first year. You can make a small berm well away from the trunk to hold water, if you wish. This is especially useful if the plant is on a slope.

Fertilizing: Azaleas do not need much fertilizer when they are in good organic soil. A small amount of an organic fertilizer for acid-loving plants can be used in early spring. Or, if you wish, established plants can be fed with a small amount of 10-10-10.

References

- Galle, Fred C. *Azaleas*. Timber Press. 1988.
Towe, L. Clarence. *American Azaleas*. Timber Press 2004.

RIWPS Policy

Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.

Note: “*Cultivation Notes*” is a regular feature in *WildfloraRI*, the *Bulletin of the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society*. If you would be interested in writing a future cultivation note article or have suggestions of plants you would like to see included, please contact Dick Fisher at Richard.Fisher2@cox.net. The previous cultivation note topics are listed on the website and there is an easy to follow set of guidelines for the format of your article. — WildfloraRI Editorial Committee.

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