GROWING AZALEAS AND RHODODENDRONS

I made a visit to a homeowner in April with a shrub that had no leaves and flowers that looked like those of an azalea. I was a bit puzzled, as I had not seen a deciduous azalea before, but sure enough, that is what it was. Most of us are used to seeing the evergreen azaleas that hold on to their leaves, but there is a deciduous one that loses it leaves in the fall, blooms in the spring and then leafs out. We think of azaleas as being shade tolerant plants, but I can tell you too much shade is not good. I have an azalea getting a lot of shade that I need to move as it is no bigger today than when I planted it 2 or 3 years ago. So, I do recommend you put your azalea in a location where it will receive some sun.

Most azaleas and rhododendrons are at their best in fairly mild, humid climates. Most of Missouri does not have their preferred climate, so selecting a good site is very important. A site sloping to the north or east is usually best, because it is protected from drying south and west winds. Here they are less subjected to rapid temperature changes in late fall or early spring.

Always plant azaleas and rhododendrons where they get wind protection. Buildings and slopes provide good barriers. Evergreen shrubs or trees such as pine, juniper or spruce planted to the south or west of rhododendrons protect them and make good backgrounds for showing off the flowers. Plants not given protection from the wind often develop leaf scorch or splitting of the bark on the stems. Avoid corners of buildings where wind tends to be stronger.

Filtered sunlight is ideal, but morning sunlight with shade after 1 p.m. is best. Plants may survive continuous shade if trees have branches pruned high. Protection from afternoon sun may also be given by fences, shrubbery or screens. Some deciduous azaleas are less sensitive to full sun and should be used if the location is not suitable for evergreen types. However, in full sun the delicate flower shades will bleach quickly even though the plants may grow well.

Proper placement alone is not enough. Azaleas and rhododendrons must have soil that is prepared carefully and thoroughly. Don't expect good results from plants set in existing soil in most areas. Roots of azaleas and rhododendrons are very delicate and unable to penetrate heavy or rocky...
soils. Because the delicate roots of azaleas and rhododendrons are easily killed, excellent drainage is important. To test drainage, dig a hole 6 inches deep in the bed and fill it with water. If the water has not drained from the hole in four hours, install drainage tile to carry away excess water, or build raised beds.

Planting azaleas and rhododendrons in groups rather than individually permits more efficient use of prepared soil. Don't place the bed close to shallow-rooted trees such as maple, ash or elm. Feeder roots rapidly move into improved soil and compete for water and plant food. For best results, dig out the bed 18 inches deep and at least 30 inches wide. Plants should be spaced 3 to 4 feet apart and at least 18 inches from the edge of the bed. If drainage is poor, build a raised bed at least a foot above ground level. Azaleas and rhododendrons must have an acid soil. Most of them thrive best at a soil pH between 5.0 and 5.5. In Missouri, most soils have a native acid reaction. However, alluvial or river bottom soils may have a more alkaline reaction and need to be made more acid to grow azaleas and rhododendrons well. Soils previously limed heavily for a garden or other crops in the past may need the pH lowered. Mortar or similar building materials mixed into the soil close to foundations may increase pH (lower acidity). When the pH is unknown, take a soil sample to your local MU Extension center for testing.

Avoid using general garden fertilizers for rhododendrons, azaleas and other acid-loving plants. Use those specially formulated for acid-loving plants and follow directions. Fertilizers supplying the ammonium form of nitrogen are best. Rhododendrons and azaleas grow well naturally at relatively low nutrient levels. Therefore, fertilization should be done carefully, or the fine, delicate roots close to the soil surface will be damaged. A fertilizer analysis similar to 6-10-4 applied at 2 pounds per 100 square feet to the soil surface is usually adequate. Cottonseed meal is also a good fertilizer. Fertilizing should be done in May, but do not fertilize after July 1. Late summer fertilization may force out tender fall growth that will be killed by the winter. Soil acidity must be maintained to ensure good growth. If the soil pH is above 5.5, apply iron sulfate or agricultural sulfur to the surface. The amount to apply will depend on the existing pH, but in all cases apply only a small amount at any one time.

SOURCE: Information for this article came from MU Guide 6825, [http://extension.missouri.edu/p/G6825](http://extension.missouri.edu/p/G6825)

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**VEGETABLE GARDEN TOUR TO BE HELD JUNE 1**

On June 1 from 12:30-4:30 pm, there will be a garden tour at the farm of Duane and Janice Carney and Thomas and Chris Yunick of Unionville. These experienced gardeners have a lot to see! It’s amazing to see all the rain barrels, raised beds, fruit trees, greenhouses and garden areas these local gardeners have on their farms. You won’t want to miss this tour. There will be fresh, local produce available for sampling if available at that time. See the April issue for more information.

**We will start at the Carney farm. Directions to the farm:** Address is 39694 State Hwy. W, Unionville, MO. Coming from the south (i.e. Kirksville), take Highway 63 north to Queen City. Turn right (west) onto Highway W. Follow Highway W until you go through Martinstown and go 2 miles outside the town. They will be on the north side of the road. They have a gray-sided house with a three-car garage next to it and a couple of other outbuildings to the west. Coming from the north, you can take either Highway W off Highway136 if you are coming from the west or Highway 149 if you are coming from the east. If you take Highway W, go 8 miles and we will be on the north side of the road. If you take Highway 149, go approximately 6 miles until you see Highway W going to the west. Go down Highway W 2 miles. The house is on the north side of the road.

Mark your calendars, ask for the afternoon off, and come see these amazing gardens. You will learn some things from these experienced gardeners that you can incorporate into your own garden. If there is enough interest we will provide transportation. **There is no cost to attend, but pre-registration is required** so we know how much food to prepare and if we need to rent vans. You can call the Adair County Extension Office at 660-665-9866 or email me at schutterjl@missouri.edu.
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

In the January and February issues of Garden Talk, I asked you to send me what you have done that has made an environmental impact. Forty-four people from 12 counties (Marion, Randolph, Monroe, Pettis, Adair, Putnam, Macon, Shelby, Sullivan, Howard, Linn, Scotland) and one person from Bicknell, Indiana (my father-in-law) responded to the question. Out of 45 total responses, 30 said they are composting; 37 are using raised beds to grow vegetables, herbs or flowers; 24 have incorporated native plants into the landscape; 18 are using rain barrels to water plants; 14 recycle old plastic pots; 14 have reduced pesticide and fertilizer usage; and 3 have rain gardens. I would like to share some of the comments that were sent.

◆ “I have 2 rain barrels I use to water my plants. I have a hotbed I am using to grow lettuce spinach and other greens. I used straw to make a bed and put windows on top of it.” Bob Schutter, Indiana.

◆ “I use many of the practices you mention, most started in the last 2 years. We have two rain barrels, connected in tandem, which we use mostly to water container plants. The plan is to add more in the future. I have composted for years, but in 2010 my husband made two compost tumblers out of used plastic barrels which we just roll across the yard to tumble. This also keeps a lot of plastic out of the landfill. I do reuse flower pots, don’t usually send any to recycling unless they are broken. I now have 2 rain gardens with native plants, plan to enlarge the second one which is too small. I also have many natives in my yard, a section of prairie plants plus some native small trees and a bush on the west side of the yard. Whenever I am considering new plants, I plan to plant mostly natives. The amount of butterflies and other pollinators in my yard is amazing! I do not till my garden but use year-round mulch in permanent beds. The use of the mulch also reduces the amount of water needed, even in a very dry year. When I start a new bed, I use a layer of newspapers or cardboard covered by mulch to keep weeds and grass down. We do not fertilize our lawn, and have not done so in many years.” Helen, Randolph County.

◆ “I do have a compost bin made from 4 wooden pallets, positioned upright and wired together. I add fruit and veggie peels, egg shells, coffee grounds and such, plus fall leaves etc. I just let nature take its course and as stuff rots down I add it to the garden soil. We do recycle flower pots, and look for homemade recipes or organic ways of controlling pests in the garden during growing season.” Judy, Pettis County.

◆ “At least 11 people from Monroe County that I know of built raised beds to grow vegetables.” Steve, Monroe County.

◆ “I have 11 raised beds, 5 compost piles/bins and one rain barrel. I recycle all plastic pots, never use lawn fertilizer, use composted goat/donkey/cow manure for fertilizer, use only organic sprays in orchard, grape arbor, blackberry plants, use grass clippings for garden bed mulch, use only pure cypress mulch around the house for bug deterrent, use lemon balm around the house for bug deterrent, have tansy planted around summer kitchen area to decrease fly population, hope to order some fly predators for barn yard this year to reduce that population, have bats and swallows for mosquito population.” Julia, Macon County.

◆ “Last summer’s drought wreaked havoc on many Northeast Missouri gardens, yet our garden thrived. Why? Two years ago, I set up a watering system that has proven quite valuable. Our garden is down hill from our guttered metal building. I found a farmer who no longer used his 1000 gallon fiberglass tank. For $20.00 and the effort to dig it out of a ditch and haul it home, and a good scrubbing inside and out, I’m able to catch any rain that falls on my building. Since the garden is below the tank, gravity is all that’s needed to get the water to the plants. When the tank is full, I divert it to drain down the hill. The biggest expense is the setup needed to get the outlet down to hose size. The parts are available at local farm supply stores.” Ben, Shelby County.

◆ I grew vegetables in mineral tubs, all organically. We never use lawn fertilizer. We leave the grass clippings on the lawn when we mow. I have a compost pile. Mary, Sullivan County.
GARDEN TIPS FOR MAY

ORNAMENTALS
• Pinch azaleas and rhododendron blossoms as they fade. Double flowered azaleas need no pinching. Fertilize azaleas after bloom. Use a formulation that has an acid reaction.
• Apples, crabapples and hawthorns susceptible to rust disease should have protective fungicidal sprays applied when these trees bloom.
• Begin planting gladiolus bulbs as the ground warms. Continue at two-week intervals. Plant hardy water lilies in tubs or garden pools.
• Continue monitoring pines, especially scotch and mugo, for sawfly activity on new shoots.
• Don’t remove spring bulb foliage prematurely or next year’s flower production will decline. Move or divide bulbs as the foliage dies.
• Canker worms (inch worms) rarely cause permanent damage to ornamentals. Use B.T. if control is deemed necessary.
• Begin planting warm-season annuals. Plant summer bulbs such as caladiums, dahlias, cannas, and elephant ears.
• Scale crawlers are active now. Infested pines and euonymus should be treated at this time.
• Trees with a history of borer problems should receive their first spray now. Repeat twice at three-week intervals.
• Begin fertilizing annuals. Continue at regular intervals.
• Pinch back mums to promote bushy growth.

VEGETABLES
• Slugs will hide during the daytime beneath a board placed over damp ground. Check each morning and destroy the slugs.
• Growing lettuce under screening materials will slow bolting and extend harvests into hot weather.
• Place cutworm collars around young transplants. Collars are easily made from cardboard strips.
• Set out tomato plants as soils warm. Place support stakes alongside at planting time. Set out peppers and eggplants after soils have warmed. Plant sweet potatoes now. Plant dill for pickle making.
• Isolate sweet, super sweet and popcorn varieties to prevent crossing.
• Keep asparagus harvested for continued spear production. Control asparagus beetles as needed.
• Thin plantings of carrots and beets to avoid overcrowding.
• Control caterpillars on broccoli and cabbage plants by handpicking or use biological sprays such as B.T.
• Remove rhubarb seeds stalks as they appear.
• Watch for striped and spotted cucumber beetles. Both may spread wilt and mosaic diseases to squash and cucumber plants.
• Make new sowings of warm-season vegetables after harvesting early crops.

FRUITS
• Mulch blueberries with pine needles or sawdust.
• Don’t spray fruits while in bloom. Refer to local Extension publications for fruit spray schedule.

TURFGRASS
• Keep bluegrass cut at 1.5 to 2.5 inch height.
• Mow tall fescues at 2 to 3.5 inch height.
• Apply post-emergence broadleaf weed controls now if needed.
• Watch for sod webworms emerging now.

- MISSOURI BOTANICAL GARDEN -

UPCOMING EVENTS

May 1: Magic City MG mtg., Moberly. Prepare for plant sale.
May 2: Heartland MG mtg., 7 pm, Area Career Center, Brookfield.
May 3 & 5: Magic City MG Plant Sale, 4-7 pm on Thursday, 9-12 on Saturday, 416 E. Carpenter, Moberly, MO.
May 5: Salt River MG Plant Sale, 8 am-1pm. Y-Men’s Pavilion in Hannibal.
May: Fabius MG club mtg, TBA.
May 8: Sullivan County MG meeting. 6 p.m., Milan
May 15: Kirksville Area MG mtg, 6:30 pm.
May 19: Seed and Plant Exchange, Butterfly Hill Farm, 1-3 pm. For info and directions www.butterflyhillfarm.blogspot.com or call 660-332-7881. Rain date is May 20 from 1-3 pm.
May 28: Macon-Shelby MG meeting, working meeting.
May 30: Adair County Lady Landowner Workshop, 9:30-3, Call 660-665-3274 x3.
June 1: Vegetable Garden Tour, see page 2.
September 14-16: State MG Conference, Sedalia, MO.