

I have always enjoyed azaleas and would love to have some in my landscape,

but I've heard they are a lot of trouble. Is that true?" B.K.

Oklahoma's hot summers and cold winters can make growing azaleas challenging, but if you

need any inspiration, just schedule a trip to Honor Heights Park in Muskogee next

spring to see a spectacular display of azaleas that prove you can be successful

with azaleas in Oklahoma. Rhododendrons and azaleas are in the same family. The term

"azalea" is used to distinguish them as a deciduous plant, which means they tend

to lose their leaves at the end of the season, while rhododendrons are typically

larger and more easily fit into the "evergreen" category. Of course, there are exceptions,

since many azaleas keep their leaves all year long depending on the weather conditions.

Interestingly, fossil records show that this plant group has been around for possibly 50

million years with very little change to their form and flowers. This is kind

of amazing once you become aware of their specific growing needs. If you want

to plant azaleas, here are some tips to start off the right foot. Choose

an appropriate site Azaleas can be sensitive to wind and sun, so the goal

is to plant them in a place where they are at least partially shielded

from the wind and the afternoon sun. Locations on the east or north side

of the house would be appropriate for this. This type of protection is not

only good for the leaves, but also for the root system since azaleas tend

to have shallow root systems, making them more susceptible to outdoor temperatures. Pay attention

to soil drainage Azaleas do not like wet roots. If you have an area

of your landscape that doesn't drain well, this would not be a good spot

for azaleas. Soils can be amended with sand or perhaps organic matter to improve

soil drainage. However, amendments will not help if you are thinking of planting them

next to the house and you don't have gutters to redirect the water somewhere

else. Sometimes drainage can be improved by simply raising the soil level in your

garden bed a few inches. If you are in this situation you might want to consider building a raised bed for your azaleas as these tend to drain better than wet areas of your yard. Soil acidity is key Before you venture into azaleas, you should get a soil test via the OSU Extension to determine your soil pH level. When you drop off your soil sample, tell them that you plan to plant azaleas because azaleas have special conditions. Typically, we think of a good pH for garden soil as around 7. However, azaleas will do best in growing conditions where the pH is between 5 to 5.5. In all likelihood, you will need to do some amending to your soil, but the soil test results will provide you with information on how to accomplish this. Adjustments to the pH of your soil should be completed before planting your azaleas. Mulch Since azaleas have shallow root systems, a good layer of mulch will help protect them against drying out but will also insulate them a bit to ward off freeze damage in the winter. Water Since azalea roots lean toward the shallow side, watering is key, especially in the summer. While mulch will help retain moisture, it will not add water to the soil. Watering azaleas can be tricky. Overwatering can saturate the soil surrounding the roots, depriving them of the oxygen they need. If the azalea roots are waterlogged, the leaves will kind of fold up and droop down. This will be pretty obvious, but here is the challenge. Azalea leaves will do the exact same thing if they are dry, which means you will need to do a little investigation to determine whether this leaf droop is caused by overwatering or underwatering. To do so, you can dig in the soil with a hand trowel to see if the soil is dry or wet, or you can purchase a soil moisture meter. These are inexpensive, easy to use and a great way to take the guesswork out of soil moisture. Fertilization Azaleas don't need a lot of additional fertilization. You can apply fertilizer in May after they have flowered, but don't

plan on fertilizing after July. Fertilizers with specific formulations for azaleas are available and these will also help maintain soil acidity. Pruning For the most part, azaleas need very little pruning except perhaps to help maintain the desired shape. Any pruning should be done after the spring flowering has ended. You should not prune after July (except to remove dead or damaged branches) because this will affect the next year's flowers. It may sound like a lot of work, but we have had azaleas in our yard for years and it's really not as difficult as it sounds. Even if it were, you just can't beat those showy flowers in the spring.

Happy gardening! Watch Now: The Men Who Would Be Scene: Episode 30 You can get answers to all your gardening questions by calling the Tulsa Master Gardeners Help Line at 918-746-3701, dropping by our Diagnostic Center at 4116 E. 15th St., or by emailing us at mg@tulsamastergardeners.org.