

Florist Azalea Plant Care

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Florist azaleas are not hardy in southeastern Nebraska and should not be placed outdoors for survival. However, they can be cared for as a regular blooming houseplant.

Make sure the soil does not dry out and the plant does not wilt. Many azalea soil mixes are composed of a high percentage of peat moss which dries quickly, especially when the plant is in full bloom. It may be necessary to water daily. Submerging the pot and allowing the peat-like soil to absorb water, and then draining in the sink may be beneficial.

Once the petals have fallen, keep the plant in a cool, sunny location. Plants may be set outdoors in partial shade for the summer. Fertilize monthly with a houseplant fertilizer. Keep



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the soil moist, but not soggy. Keep the plant outdoors as long as possible in the fall, but bring indoors before a heavy frost.

In order for the plants to re-bloom, it is necessary to go through a cool, dormant period. Temperatures between 40 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit are ideal. Warmer temperatures will probably limit flower bud formation. Plants should receive full sun during this period. Continue to water but limit fertilizer. When flower buds start forming, move the plant to a warmer location and increase humidity.

A Gardener's New Year's Resolutions

Have you made your New Year's resolutions yet? If you are like most people, you have probably resolved to lose a few pounds or exercise a bit more or perhaps even cut back on your spending. But this is a good time to resolve to do your part to help protect the environment.

Here are twelve resolutions for the coming year:

1. To put as little as possible into the local landfill by recycling cardboard, cans and compostable materials.
2. To start a compost pile for grass clippings, dead leaves, plant residues and other organic matter, including kitchen scraps to be used in the garden as compost and mulch to enrich the soil and improve plant growth.



Composting turns yard "waste" such as grass clippings and dead leaves (left) into compost which can enrich soil (right).

3. To use biological controls for pests and disease in the garden, whenever feasible, including planting disease-

resistant varieties and buying organic pesticides.

4. To apply pesticides and other horticultural chemicals only as a last resort and to always use them safely and prudently.

5. To store all garden chemicals in their original containers, out of reach of children and pets and preferably in a locked storage area.

6. To use fertilizers only as needed, according to soil tests and use organic forms, whenever possible.

7. To mow properly (often, not too high or low) and leave grass clippings to replenish and recycle organic matter and nutrients back into the soil.



Grass clippings should be less than one inch, or no more than 1/3 of the total plant height, to ensure rapid decomposition.

8. To make water conservation a high priority by mulching, using efficient watering methods such as drip irrigation systems and selecting drought-resistant ornamental plants.

9. To develop a landscape plan that works with the



Drip irrigation conserves water by reducing evaporation.

environment, for example, ground covers on steep banks to prevent soil erosion and shade trees on the sunny side of a home to act as a natural air conditioner. Landscaping can also help reduce temperature extremes, filter out air pollutants and stop noise.

10. To create natural wildlife habitats by planting trees and shrubs that provide food or cover or by leaving brush and undergrowth in certain areas for birds, rabbits and other small animals to use as a protective haven.

11. To provide food and water for the birds and to continue to feed them once they have come to depend on you.

12. To encourage others, whenever possible, to do all they can to help preserve the environment and our natural resources.

Source: Dr. Leonard Perry, Extension Professor, University of Vermont

Proper Landscape Plant Maintenance

After plants are established in the landscape, maintenance needs can be minimized by following correct maintenance procedures on a timely basis. Following are some suggestions to reduce the time and amount of maintenance necessary in established landscapes.

1. Practice preventive maintenance—Be observant of your plants. Watch for disease and insect outbreaks regularly. Pests are much easier to control if they are affecting only a few leaves or one branch. By the time they spread to several plants or an entire shrub border, they will be more difficult to control.

2. Use the right tool—Power tools can make short work of many maintenance operations. However, make certain they are the right tools for the job. For example, weed whips or string trimmers quickly mow down weeds and grass around buildings and fences, but should be used with

caution around trees. The force of the trimmer line can cause injury to the bark, leading to girdling, unless the tree is protected from direct contact with the trimmer.

3. Irrigate various plant zones separately—Some plants are better adapted to hot, dry conditions than others. If plants of similar growth requirements are grouped together in the landscape, they can be watered as a group. Use the appropriate type of irrigation system for the planting. Overhead sprinklers or pop-up heads on an underground irrigation system may be most appropriate for turf. For shrubs and flower beds, drip irrigation may be the most efficient system.

4. Fertilize in moderation—Base your fertilization programs on soil test results. Recycle as many nutrients as possible on-site by leaving clippings on the lawn and applying leaf mulch compost

to planting beds. Over-fertilization leads to excessive growth that needs frequent pruning. Excessive fertilization may also force growth that will be more susceptible to insect and disease attack.

5. Prune when appropriate—Take care of pruning needs when the problem first develops. Cut out weak, narrow crotches on branches, crossing branches or competing branches while they are still small in diameter. These problems will not correct themselves and the pruning job becomes more major with each season the task is delayed. Avoid planting trees and shrubs where they will outgrow their designated space without frequent pruning.

Several hours of planning and thought before planting can prevent maintenance headaches for years to come.

Source: Christopher Starbuck, University of Missouri



Avoid heavy traffic on the frozen, dormant lawn. The crown of the plant may be severely damaged or killed.

Do not wait until late in the winter to order seeds. Many varieties sell out early.

Add garden record keeping to the list of New Year's resolutions. Make a note of which varieties of flowers and vegetables do best and which do poorly in your garden.

Feed the birds regularly and see they have water. Birds like suet, fruit, nuts and bread crumbs as well as birdseed.

Brush snow from evergreens, as soon as possible, after a storm. Use a broom in an upward, sweeping motion. Serious damage may be caused by heavy snow or ice accumulating on the branches.

Check young trees and shrubs for rodent or rabbit damage. Prevent injury with fencing or protective collars.

Use sand instead of salt for icy spots on the sidewalk.

Review your vegetable garden plans. Perhaps a smaller garden with fewer weeds and insects will give you more produce.

When reviewing your garden catalogs for new vegetable varieties to try, an important consideration is improved insect and/or disease resistance. Watch also for drought-tolerant types.

Analyze last year's planting, fertilizing and spraying records. Make notes to reorder successful varieties, as well as those you wish to try again.

Check stored fruits and vegetables, such as potatoes and apples, for bad spots which may lead to decay. Remove and use those which show signs of spoiling. Separate others into slotted trays or

bins to increase air circulation and reduce decay possibilities.

To prolong bloom, protect poinsettias from drafts and keep them moderately moist.

Turn and prune house plants regularly to keep them shapely. Pinch back new growth to promote bushy plants.

Check all house plants closely for insect infestations. Quarantine gift plants until you determine that they are not harboring any pests.

Houseplants and holiday gift plants should not be placed on top of the television. This location is too warm and in most homes too far from windows to provide adequate light.

During the winter most houses are too dry for houseplants. Humidity may be increased by placing plants on trays lined with pebbles and filled with water to within one half inch of the base of the pot.

Houseplants with large leaves and smooth foliage, such as philodendrons, dracaena and rubber plant benefit if their leaves are washed at intervals to remove dust and grime, helping keep the leaf pores open.

If you have some time this winter, paint the handles of garden tools red or orange. This will preserve the wood and make the tools easier to locate next summer when you lay them down in the garden or on the lawn.

Move garden ornaments such as urns or jars into the garage or basement to prevent damage during the cold winter season. If containers are too large to move, cover them to prevent water collecting in them or turn them upside down during the winter so water will not collect and freeze in them causing breakage.

About Soil Testing

UNL Soil and Plant Analytical Laboratory offers a full range of soil test analyses. Sample boxes and forms are available from the extension office (444 Cherrycreek Road, Lincoln) or from the lab (139 Keim Hall, UNL East Campus). A basic test measures pH, phosphorus, potassium and organic matter—cost is \$11.

Soil testing kits are also available for purchase at many garden centers.

It is a good idea to for new property owners to test their soil to find out what soil amendments may or may not be needed. Late fall or early winter is a good time for soil sampling.

