



STARNOTE 525
June 2009

AZALEAS, CAMELLIAS, GARDENIAS AND MORE

Selecting and growing acid-loving plants

Without question, these plants are among the most beautiful of all flowering shrubs. Many are planted here and most struggle to survive. The reasons are simple. These acid-loving plants need rich, well-drained garden soil and a constant moisture supply. For the most part, we have poor, dry, alkaline soil with little or no drainage. Very low humidity, scalding sun and hot, drying winds cause more problems. The maximum sunlight and minimum rainfall that many of us enjoy are very tough on these popular plants. With this knowledge and some careful planning, you can successfully grow these plants in the desert.

Following are some brief descriptions of each variety with some handy planting and maintenance tips. A list of plants commonly grown in medium to full shade is also provided. For more complete information and variety descriptions, consult the *Sunset Western Garden Book*.

◆ AZALEA

- ◆ Prepare the soil
- ◆ Planting
- ◆ Water and fertilize

◆ CAMELLIA

- ◆ Prepare the soil
- ◆ Planting
- ◆ Water and fertilize

◆ GARDENIA

- ◆ Prepare the soil
- ◆ Planting
- ◆ Water and fertilize

◆ DEALING WITH OUR HIGH pH WATER

◆ OTHER ACID-LOVING PERENNIALS AND SHRUBS

AZALEA. Small-leaved evergreen species of rhododendron that blooms in early spring. A wide range of colors is available, including red, white, pink and lavender. Plant sizes range from compact dwarfs to 4-5 foot hybrids. They are often grown in patio containers and hanging baskets. Give these plants a north or east exposure in the garden. An ideal location would be filtered shade beneath or near tall trees, especially

pinus. Remember, these plants will not take full sun in our climate. Pinch tip growth after flowering to keep compact shape. [\(top\)](#)

Prepare the soil with a 50-50 mixture of *Paydirt™ Planting Mix* and native soil. Add 3-4 handfuls of pre-moistened peat moss to the mixture. Good drainage is critical but so is moisture retention. If your planting location won't drain properly or dries out too quickly, consider a raised bed to meet these requirements. When planting in pots, use a complete all-purpose potting mix. Amend the mix lightly with pre-moistened peat moss.

Planting Azaleas high, with top of the root ball slightly above soil level. Do not bury the plant or allow soil to accumulate around stems. Water thoroughly with a solution of *Dr. Q's® Plant Tonic* and water. Apply a 2-inch layer of bark mulch or pine needles. Because of shallow surface roots, do not cultivate around the plants. Raised beds or containers are great for these plants. [\(top\)](#)

Water and fertilize azaleas regularly. More frequent watering may be needed in raised beds. Flush containers with the hose at least twice a year to remove excess, water-induced salts; run the hose for several minutes each time. Use a fertilizer rich in sulfur like *Dr. Q's® Rose & Flower Food or Gold Dust*. Feed when new growth is first noticed in spring, at bloom time, and monthly thereafter until August. [\(top\)](#)

CAMELLIA. While there are dozens of camellia species and even more hybrids, the two basic types most commonly found in our area are *Japanese Camellia* (*Camellia japonica*) and *Sun Camellia* (*Camellia sasanqua*). Both varieties are evergreen and make excellent container specimens for patios or gardens. Flowers range from single to fully double in all colors from white and rose to pink and red. Japanese types are taller, frequently exceeding 6 feet, and flower most heavily from fall through winter. They make excellent espalier, bonsai and ground cover subjects as well. Don't be fooled by the name! All camellias need protection from direct and reflected afternoon sun, and hot winds. Best planting exposures are north and east in medium to full shade, or early morning sun. [\(top\)](#)

Prepare the soil with a 50-50 mixture of *Paydirt™ Planting Mix*. Add *Dr. Q's® Gold Dust Starter Fertilizer* according to package instructions. Make sure your planting site has excellent drainage. If planting in containers, use an all-purpose potting mix like *Filthy Rich™*. Redwood tubs, or half-barrels make the best containers for camellias. Add *Paydirt™* to soil surface as it settles. [\(top\)](#)

Planting Camellias so the trunk base is above the soil line. Water thoroughly with a solution of *Dr. Q's® Plant Tonic* and water. Never let soil build up around the trunk. Keep roots cool in summer with a 2-inch layer of bark mulch. Raised beds or containers are great for these plants.

Water and fertilize regularly. Camellias like excellent drainage and moist soil. Flush salts from the soil with a slow, deep hose soaking, or several hours of drip irrigation in early and late summer. Fertilize with an acid fertilizer like *Dr. Q's® Rose & Flower Food or Gold Dust* just after bloom and again 6 weeks later. Treat with iron chelates like *KeRex®* as needed to prevent chlorosis. [\(top\)](#)

GARDENIA. These evergreen shrubs grow to 5-6 feet tall. They are temperamental and difficult to grow in alkaline desert soils, performing best when grown in containers. If trying in the garden, heavily amended, raised beds are your best bet. Dwarf varieties are good hanging basket subjects. *Mystery* is a well-known variety with double flowers from May through July. All varieties have intensely fragrant blooms. Excellent drainage and rich, moist soil are necessary for success. Keep gardenias out of direct sunlight. North or east exposure in filtered to medium shade is best. Gardenias like heat but need protection from frost and freezing. Prune lightly to shape as needed. [\(top\)](#)

Prepare the soil with a 50-50 mix of *Paydirt™ Planting Mix* and native dirt. Add peat moss if necessary to insure water retention while keeping good drainage. Use an all-purpose potting mix for container subjects. Add *Dr. Q's® Gold Dust Starter Fertilizer* per package directions. [\(top\)](#)

Plant gardenias high, like azaleas and avoid competition from other plants. Water well with a solution of *Dr. Q's® Plant Tonic* and water. Mulch soil surface with a 2-inch layer of fine or medium bark and don't cultivate. A layer of peat moss makes a good container mulch. Raised beds or containers are great for these plants.

Water and fertilize gardenias regularly. Keep soil moist and leach salts through heavy, slow soaking 2-3 times during the summer. Feed with an acid-based fertilizer like *Dr. Q's® Rose & Flower Food* or *Gold Dust* every 4 weeks from March through October. Treat with iron chelates as needed to combat chlorosis. [\(top\)](#)

DEALING WITH OUR HIGH pH WATER

Even though you may start your acid loving plants with well amended soil where the pH has been balanced, because our tap water generally has a pH of 8.2 and above, you will need to treat the soil periodically to keep the pH down. A great product to help you accomplish this is Con-Grow (see [Gardening Tip #1016](#)). [\(top\)](#)

OTHER ACID-LOVING PERENNIALS AND SHRUBS

Perennial flower varieties like Hydrangea (Blue), Orchids, Rhododendrons, Amaryllis, Bilbergia, Christmas Cactus, Creeping Fig, Croton, Prayer Plant, Rubber Plant, Tradescantia and of course Photinia; these should be treated in much the same way as the shrubs discussed above.

[\(top\)](#)

Ask a friendly Star Nursery associate if you have additional questions about plant selection, location, planting and care.