# The Daily Tribune News/Digging For Answers - 1/12/03

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**Azalea Questions**

A number of area residents have called the Bartow County Extension office recently with concerns about their azaleas - even though these plants are still several months away from resuming growth and flowering. I suspect the last several years of record-setting drought and dry weather have caused most of these problems. Some of the more common questions include:

**Q**. "Why are the leaves on my azaleas turning yellow? I watered and fertilized this summer like I was supposed to, but now at least a third to a half of the foliage has yellowed and dropped off."

**A**. Azaleas always lose a few leaves during the late fall and winter months. But this year I have noticed an unusually large number yellow leaves on azaleas in area landscapes, particularly on the Japanese or Kurume azaleas. In fact, some of the azaleas planted near the old Courthouse here in Cartersville have more yellow leaves than green leaves. Drought and dry weather during recent summers have stressed many plants, especially azaleas and dogwoods. Azaleas have very shallow roots systems with most of their roots living in the top six to eight inches of the soil. Even during normal years, a third of the older leaves on azaleas may turn yellow and drop during the wintertime. In dry years, however, it’s not unusual to see as much yellow foliage on azalea plants as green foliage. The yellow leaves are actually the older leaves that have grown on the plant for a year or more. They have ‘served their time’ - so to speak - in the photosynthetic or food-making process and are now turning yellow and dropping off. This is a natural procedure for azaleas so don’t panic. New foliage should appear in the early spring as temperatures warm.

**Q**. "My azaleas have grown way too big and are covering up my front windows. I’ve heard that this is the time to cut them way back. Is this true?"

**A**. Actually, this is a rather tricky question. According to our Extension Horticulture Department the time to severely prune back large shrubs is about 4 to 6 weeks before new growth begins.

And by ‘severely pruning back’ - I am referring to when you remove 50% or more of the growth. This is a good time to prune back plants like hollies, ligustrum, abelia or other *evergreen* shrubs.

But an important factor to consider when pruning *flowering* plants, like azaleas or crepe myrtles, is knowing when they bloom. In the case of azaleas, forsythia, spirea and other spring-flowering plants, keep in mind that if those plants are pruned now you will cut off this spring's flower buds.

In other words, severely pruning back azaleas now will result in the plants having no flowers later in the year. Even a light pruning may remove most of the flower buds. Therefore, you may wish to wait until after your azaleas flower and then heavily prune or shape to the desired height.

**Q**. "I noticed some kind of white, gummy-looking growths on the stems of my azalea plants during the holidays. At first I thought this was sap, but it wasn't. What have I got?"

**A**. What you have is actually an insect, believe it or not, called wax scale. There are many, many different kinds of scale insects that infest plants in our landscapes. Wax scale is one of the more common and larger scale insects that live on trees and shrubs and thus they are easy to recognize. Scale insects are related to mealybugs. These insects suck the sap from leaves and stems, often causing plants to wilt, drop leaves or decline, and if left unchecked, resulting in severe damage or death. Scale insects, like mealybugs, often secret a sweet, sticky substance called honeydew which may then in turn attract ants and other nuisance insects. To control scale, treat plants with a horticultural oil applied according to label directions.

**Q**. "I want to plant some native azaleas in my backyard later this year under some pine trees. Can you suggest several types with blooming dates and flower color?"

**A**. You may want to try one of these native azaleas: the Florida azalea(golden yellow flowers), Piedmont azalea(white to deep pink flowers) and Oconee azalea(brilliant orange flowers) bloom in spring. The Flame azalea(yellow-orange to deep red flowers) and Cumberland azalea(brilliant red flowers) bloom in summer. And the Sweet azalea(white flowers) blooms in late summer.

And speaking of azaleas, I noticed several azaleas in front of the old Courthouse here on Cherokee Street that were blooming earlier this week - in January !?!

For more information on azaleas and caring for azaleas, contact the Bartow County Extension office at 770-387-5142 or uge1015@arches.uga.edu.