



Growing Rhododendrons and Azaleas

Although there are about 1,000 rhododendron species and possibly 10,000 hybrids, most are too tender for New England. Those that will grow here need special attention if they are to flourish.

Site and Selection

Evergreen rhododendrons grow best in a woody location where they are protected during the cold season. Winter sun and wind tend to evaporate water from the leaves but, because the roots are frozen, the lost water cannot be replaced. The result is leaf browning or “scorch.”

Rhododendrons should not be planted directly beneath shallow-rooted trees such as pines or maples because of root competition. Heavy shade also will reduce flowering; good light in summer is essential.

The ideal site is an opening in a grove of trees, or the north side of trees or a building. If natural protection by trees is not available, temporary winter structures can be made of burlap, boards, or evergreen boughs. These also protect from snow damage.

Planting

Rhododendrons and azaleas have fine, shallow root systems that allow plants to be moved very easily, even during flowering. The fine roots grow poorly in heavy soils; generous additions of organic matter are essential for good growth. Sphagnum peat and/or compost are recommended.

Most New England soils are sufficiently acid for these plants, but the use of acid peat in the planting hole will help increase the acidity.

Mulching

Mulching helps keep the roots cool and moist in summer and prevents alternate freezing and thawing in the winter. Pine needles and oak leaves make ideal mulches. Apply two or three inches deep, adding new material as the old needles or leaves decompose.

Fertilizing

Rhododendrons and azaleas grow slowly and therefore need little fertilizer. An occasional light sprinkling of an acid-type fertilizer over the mulch will be sufficient. Fertilize in early spring when moisture is plentiful.

Pruning

Rhododendrons and azaleas frequently outgrow their allotted space or become lanky in their habit. They can be pruned severely, within a foot of the ground if necessary, but severe pruning may delay flowering for several years. Occasional light pruning is preferred, cutting back one or two branches every year. Prune immediately after flowering.

Insects and Diseases

Rhododendrons are not prone to disease and insect attacks. The azalea sawfly, a small, green caterpillar, is serious on some azaleas as the young leaves emerge. Spray with an appropriate garden insecticide.

Caterpillars sometimes chew holes in rhododendron leaves. Generally this is not serious, but heavy populations of the fall webworm on nearby trees may move to rhododendrons and cause serious damage.

Rhododendrons may occasionally die from root diseases. When this happens, find another site for new plants.

Original fact sheet by Dr. Douglas Routley, UNH Department of Plant Biology, revised 1/01

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