



RHODODENDRONS

Plant Rhododendrons in dappled shade or sheltered woodland, but not in deep shade—an eastern or northern exposure with protection from direct afternoon sunlight is ideal. Be sure the area you choose is also protected from winds and early morning sun in winter.

Rhododendrons prefer a moist, well-drained, humus-rich, acidic soil. A pH of 4.5-5.5 is ideal. If your soil is alkaline (pH greater than 7.2), work some elemental sulfur into the hole when planting, following the label instructions. (Sulfur can burn plants if too much is applied.) Frequent retesting of the soil pH is important. Incorporate plenty of organic matter in and around the planting hole. Sphagnum peat moss, aged chopped leaves or compost work well. It is essential that the soil is very well drained. Planting in a raised bed can help to improve drainage.

Rhododendrons are shallow-rooted plants that will rot if planted too deeply. Plant with about 1" of the root ball exposed. If the roots are thick and matted, slice through them vertically several times to a depth of 1" before planting. This will ensure soil contact and help the plant to root.

After planting, water in well and mulch to a depth of 2-3 inches with a loose, open material such as pine bark, pine needles or chopped oak leaves. Do not use sphagnum peat as a mulching material because when it is dry it sheds water and is hard to rewet. Avoid cultivation and foot traffic around the plants, as this disturbs their shallow roots. Be sure to water new plantings during dry spells. Aim for 1" of water per week and measure it with a rain gauge. Long, slow watering encourages deeper rooting and healthier plants. Frequent light sprinklings encourage shallow roots and leave plants susceptible to drought. It's especially important to water well in the fall, so the plant goes into the winter with a good supply of moisture.

Spraying evergreen Rhododendrons in the late fall with an anti-desiccant such as Wilt-Pruf will help to counteract some of the drying effects of winter wind and sun.

Prune Rhododendrons immediately after they flower. Removing spent blooms encourages the plant to put energy into new growth rather than into producing seeds. At the same time, remove any dead or diseased wood, cutting down to right above a healthy bud. Be sure to dip pruning tools into a 10:1 water/bleach solution between cuts. After removing dead or diseased wood, prune back any tall, gangly branches shooting out of the top of the bush.

Rhododendrons should not be fertilized until after they have finished flowering. They are not heavy feeders and too much fertilizer may damage them. An Azalea, Camellia and Rhododendron food with slow release nitrogen is recommended.