



## Success with Rhododendrons

The rhododendrons and azaleas have been blooming for several weeks now, with some species earlier and some later. They make such a spectacular display that rhododendrons have become one of the most popular landscape plants in nurseries. And there are such a wide array of hybrids and species, that there is a choice in size and color for every taste.

So, what's the difference between an azalea and a rhododendron? Actually azaleas are members of the Rhododendron genus. Most azaleas are deciduous (they lose their leaves in the autumn) while most rhododendrons are evergreen. But it isn't a hard-and-fast rule.

On a more technical level, they can be distinguished by the leaves and flower stamen.

Rhododendrons have 10 or more stamen (those pollen bearing filaments that extend from the center of the bloom), while azalea flowers mostly have 5.

Perhaps you are one of the many who flocked to nursery centers in search of rhododendrons for your landscape. You need to

understand how to site and care for them so they flourish in the alkaline soils of the Midwest. Rhododendrons and azaleas sold in area nurseries are hardy for our area--not to be mistaken for the greenhouse variety available at florist shops, which won't survive our winters.



Healthy rhododendron growth is dependent on siting, soil preparation, and specific maintenance practices. Once planted, it is difficult to change site characteristics, so let's begin with considering what's optimal.

### Choosing a site

On the east coast, evergreen "rhodos" grow wild along the wooded hillsides. They flourish in the acid-based soils and protection of the hills. To replicate these conditions, the most successful local plantings are snuggled near the foundation of a house on the north side,

sheltered from winter sun and midday sun in the summer.

On a sunny winter day, the cycling of daytime solar heat and nighttime cold scorches and desiccates the leaves, stressing the plant. If your rhododendron can't have a winter-shade location on the north, consider ways to create protection—perhaps surrounding it with a seasonal burlap barrier set on stakes.

For deciduous types of rhododendrons, winter shade is not an issue, but some summer shade is. If there is a canopy of filtered light, supplied by surrounding trees and shrubs, it will be happier.

### Soil, soil, soil

Our Midwestern soils, which develop from limestone bedrock, are typically heavy, alkaline clay types. This makes it an ongoing challenge to keep the soil in an acidic condition. Like trying to straighten naturally curly hair—it requires continual maintenance.

Begin by assessing the quality of the soil where you site the plant. In older neighborhoods (40-plus years) soils were left intact when homes were built, and topsoil is often deep. In today's

tract developments, topsoil is a drainable well for watering. He A word of caution: it is not scraped, with only a thin layer reports that this has maintained enough to dig out and amend a replaced before landscaping. the vigor of his clients' small area around the plant. Nor

In either case, soil next to the Annual surface addition of bed" that is simply a mound of foundation is often of lesser compost is a tried-and-true soil around the raised quality, backfilled with clay or— technique. rhododendron. Roots need

worse yet—construction debris. adequate room to stretch horizontally in all directions, and amend or replace poor quality purposes. It keeps roots cool and clay left a foot or two away can soil in these areas. weeds from flourishing. When act like a pot that prevents

Soil for rhododendrons needs to hand. Cultivating the soil around drainage and root penetration. be loamy and well-amended with a rhododendron damages the When drought strikes

moisture-holding humus— shallow surface roots. These past two summers have brought difficult hot, dry spells. All mushroom compost, peat, plants suffer, but rhododendrons composted yard waste, or leaf Add some soil sulfur or can't tolerate drought. The mold. There are a couple of ways ammonium sulfate to the mix for can't tolerate drought. The to accomplish this. One is to dig a slow-releasing acidifier. The advantage of locating the plants

out the poor soil, and another is acidity will help keep the plants a near a northern foundation is that to create a raised bed filled with deep healthy green, allowing the it will be one of the coolest optimal soil mix. roots to take up essential locations even in arid

nutrients from the soil. In conditions—and, a water spigot is usually close by. Mulching and maintaining for subsequent years, use an acid- based fertilizer formulated for success

Create a thick layer of mulch rhododendrons. Follow directions Take the time to give your without piling it up around the on the package and don't rhododendron a drink. Under base of the plant. This allows overdo. average conditions, the pests and disease easier access. equivalent of 1" of rain a week

Instead, plant the rhododendron Equally essential is adequate will do. In especially hot, dry 2" higher than the surrounding drainage. The soil should hold spells, increase that — up to two bed. Slope the soil away, then moisture without waterlogging the times a week—as the air sucks mulch to within a couple of inches roots. Clay soils don't allow moisture out of the ground and of the plant. water to run off, and because of plants at a quickened pace. If clay's soil structure, it binds the your rhododendron bed is

One professional gardener uses moisture rather than supplying adequately drained with good a heavy circlet of mushroom the even moisture required. A humus-rich soil, you won't need compost around each raised bed can provide both the to be concerned about rhododendron in spring, creating humus rich soil and the drainage. over-watering.