

## RHODODENDRON CARE & CULTURE

Rhododendrons are a group of evergreen shrubs grown for their year-round foliage interest and showy spring bloom. There are thousands of varieties of Rhododendrons in the world, with species native from the Himalayas to the Pacific Northwest. Rhododendrons are extremely popular in this area because they really do flourish in our climate, and are very reliable performers in the landscape.

**Latin name:** *Rhododendron*

**Type:** Evergreen shrubs

**Exposure:** Partial Shade

**Growth Rate:** Slow-moderate, varies

**Hardiness:** Most will survive –10° F

**Size:** Varies. 12"-8'

**Soil:** Well-drained, acidic

**Growth Habit:** Very variable

### How to select-

- Size is the first consideration. Rhododendrons can range from ground hugging varieties that only reach about a foot tall, to larger hybrids which can reach 8'+. Do you have room?
- Color in Rhododendrons is wide-ranging, from white to pink to red, and some achieving a lemon yellow or orange color. The easiest way to find a color you like is to see one actually in bloom.
- Rhododendrons will bloom somewhere in about a 5 month span. When do you need a blooming Rhododendron most?

### Where can I plant my Rhododendrons?

Contrary to a popular belief, Rhododendrons do not appreciate full, hot sun. Many plants have died or suffered greatly because of this, so please keep this in mind and give them a little shade in the afternoon. They won't thrive in complete shade either, so try to find an area which gets morning sun and afternoon shade. High wind areas can be damaging, as dry winds can dry a Rhododendron's leaves out quickly.

### What kind of soil do I need?

This is a big concern for rhododendrons. Drainage is very important, as root rot is very apt to occur in waterlogged soils. This will kill the plant in a matter of months. The opposite side of the spectrum is dry soil, which will make a plant very unhealthy and could eventually cause death, especially in hot weather. Dry soil is usually worst closest to a house, or under a large conifer. Rhododendrons prefer an acidic soil, which is usually pretty prevalent in this area, but may need work if your soil has been amended or replaced. Areas near concrete structures, like walkways, patios, and foundations can be hazardous because they gradually secrete lime which will raise the soil pH over time, harming rhododendrons.

### How do I prune a Rhododendron?

It's all about timing. Buds for next years' flowers will be set in fall, so a fall pruning will more or less destroy any bloom for the next spring. The best pruning time is right after the bloom. Pruning is simply a part of Rhododendron cultivation, and will need to be done majorly every 5-10 years or so to really keep the plant looking good and healthy. Yearly pruning tasks include pruning off any erratic or strange looking growth, and pulling dead flower clusters off of some large flowered varieties. Every 5-10 years, most of the larger varieties should be cut back severely to encourage them to be more compact and healthier. Don't be afraid to really cut back hard, as rhododendrons have dormant buds hiding in the bark which will pop out when you cut back hard. When you do a major pruning, your bloom may be affected for the next year until the plant can fill out a little. If this step is neglected,

your plants will usually get to be pretty out of control, and then after a long time, will really slow down and perform poorly.

### **When and what do I fertilize with?**

It is best to fertilize in early spring (March) with a fertilizer made for plants that thrive in acidic soil. This isn't a necessity every year, but will be beneficial for younger plants, plants that have just been cut back, and plants with nutrient deficiency. Sometimes, rhododendrons will suffer from "chlorosis", which is a lack of iron, and is diagnosed by the yellowing of the leaves. Most rhododendron fertilizers will automatically incorporate iron, but you may need to check your soil acidity to make sure the pH is correct. When soil pH is not acidic enough, the plants will have a hard time up taking specific nutrients, such as iron.

### **Troubleshooting-**

**\*Brown leaf tips:** Usually indicates salt burn. This happens in areas that don't get enough water, areas close to concrete structures, areas that have been overfertilized, or also in any areas that cats may decide to use as a restroom. You may be able to leach the salts out by soaking the soil, but the area may just be uninhabitable by a rhododendron.

**\*Brown to gray blotches on leaves:** Often caused by sun burn. This will happen to plants that aren't receiving enough water, to plants in too much sun, or to plants getting reflected heat from something.

**\*Yellowing leaves:** Can be a sign of too much sun, or a nutrient deficiency.

**\*Rolling leaves:** If there is no insect present, this could be a sign of dryness. Rhododendrons will do this as a water saving measure, so water more if they do this in summer. If it happens in winter, don't worry too much, it is a response to cold, dry air.

**\*Notches on leaves:** Root weevil will chew notches around the outside of leaves. Treat immediately, as the notches will be the least of your troubles when they get going.

**\*Droopy leaves, pointing towards ground, discoloring:** A sign of either root rot or root weevil. Both affect the uptake of water in the plant, the drooping is a sign of a lack of water reaching the leaves. Root weevil damage can be seen if you look at the bark (or actually lack of) right below the soil line. Root weevil will chew all of the bark off of the trunk right below the soil. Root rot occurs in heavy, waterlogged soils, and is most likely to occur over the winter.