

Success with Rhododendrons



Rhododendron Redwood

The Pacific Northwest has one of the finest rhododendron growing climates in the country. They are an integral part of many landscapes, and their variety is astounding.

Choosing Rhododendrons

There are a few important considerations when choosing rhododendrons for your garden.

- Choose a variety that is suitable to your site. Some, mostly small leaved forms, are tolerant of full sun and heat. Other varieties need partial shade. Some will thrive in full shade but may not bloom well.
- Choose a variety that will not grow too large for the area. Look at the ratings given by the American Rhododendron Society. The size given is average size in 10 years (in average growing conditions). Most rhododendrons grow as wide as they do tall- if you have chosen a variety that grows to 6' in 10 years, it will likely be at least 6' wide in that time as well.
- Choose a variety that has a form and foliage you find attractive. Most are in bloom 2-4 weeks; the rest of the year you will be looking at foliage.

Growing Rhododendrons

Rhododendrons are quite easy to please in the garden.

- Rhododendrons prefer organic rich, well-drained soil that has good moisture in the summer. Amend sandy or heavy soil with fine bark. In poorly drained sites, plant on berms, mounds, or in raised beds.
- Rhododendrons have shallow, fibrous root systems. Plant them slightly higher than they were in their containers, and mulch to conserve moisture.
- Irrigate during dry spells, especially if they are still growing.
- Use an acid plant fertilizer. Many species rhododendrons and some fertilize-sensitive hybrids prefer a slow releasing fertilizer. Cottonseed meal is an excellent, slow release, organic fertilizer for rhododendrons.



Rhododendron pachysanthum x yakushmanum, new foliage



Pruning and Dead-Heading

Normally very little pruning is needed.

Deadheading, or removing the spent flower trusses, can help the plant set flower buds for the following season by not allowing seed to set. On plants that hold their flowers in trusses, remove the withered flower clusters after the bloom is over. The truss will break free from the plant with a quick snap of the thumb pushing on the side.

Light to moderate pruning done while the plant is flowering or immediately thereafter will not affect flower bud formation for the following year. Sometimes, as the plant starts to grow, only one growth bud at the end of a stem will

begin to expand. If this single bud is broken off just as it starts to enlarge, it will cause two or more dormant buds at the end of the stem to expand, making a bushier plant. Again, this will not affect bud set for the coming year. Older, overgrown plants can be rejuvenated by hard pruning just after the bloom is finished. Cut back to prominent growth buds, preferably ones that are pointing outward. Severely pruned plants may not bloom well for the next few seasons. Smaller flowered rhododendrons that hold their blooms along the stems rather than in trusses can be pruned or sheared after flowering. They have dormant leaf buds along their stems which will push new growth.

Pests and Diseases

The most serious pest of rhododendrons in the Pacific Northwest are root weevils. The adult root weevils emerge in early spring and feed on the rhododendron leaves, causing notching in the leaf edges. This damage is mostly cosmetic but can be quite severe. The more serious damage is caused by the root weevil larvae feeding on the plant roots. Some control can be had by applying beneficial nematodes (*H. bacteriophora*, *H. megidis*) to the soil in mid-summer. The soil temperature must be above 55°F, and moist. Neem, a botanical pesticide, can also be used for controlling root weevil larvae. For effective control, mix neem with water and thoroughly soak the soil surrounding the infected plant. Treatment with neem for root weevil damage can begin in April or May. Prevent adult root weevils from feeding on foliage by applying sticky barriers to the trunks of susceptible plants. Usually a 3" wide band of cardboard or burlap, coated with Tanglefoot is needed. Prune off branches that touch the ground.



Black vine weevil, the most common rhododendron pest

Less common problems of rhododendrons

- Aphids may appear on tender new growth- control by washing off with a strong jet of water, or use insecticidal soap.
- Powdery mildew- plant resistant varieties, provide adequate air circulation. There are also some sprays for treating mildew, but removing mildew-prone varieties is a better option.