

Growing Rhododendrons and Azaleas

Richard Zimmerman and Willem van Eck, *Retired Extension Specialists*
WVU Extension Service, Agriculture and Natural Resources

Learn about optimal planting and growing conditions for West Virginia's state flower.

Popular species

Rhododendrons and azaleas are some of West Virginians' favorite landscape shrubs. Several species of azalea and the native Rosebay Rhododendron (*Rhododendron maximum*) and Catawba Rhododendron (*Rhododendron catawbiense*) abound in our wooded areas and have been the source of many hybrids produced by plant breeders.



Rhododendron

Cultivation requirements

Rhododendrons and azaleas are somewhat finicky in their cultivation requirements. Certain conditions must be met for the plants to remain healthy and produce the desired growth.



Azalea

Soil

Both azaleas and rhododendrons need a good garden loam, rich in organic matter, with a pH of 4.5 to 5.5. The soil must also be well drained since rhododendron will not withstand a wet root zone.

Site

Rhododendrons grow best in a north to northeast exposure or where they are not subjected to direct, bright sunlight. This is especially important during winter months. Azaleas also exhibit less stress and pest problems if grown out of direct, hot afternoon sun.

Planting

Rhododendrons and azaleas should be planted in a shallow hole. The root ball should be placed so the top of the ball is 1 to 2 inches above the soil line. The width of the planting hole should be 2 to 3 times the diameter of the root ball. A 2 to 3 inch layer of mulch should be applied to cover the root ball. The best time for planting is early spring.

– continued –

Watering

Rhododendrons should be kept moist at all times but **not** wet. Proper mulching will help maintain favorable moisture levels.

Fertilizing

In general, rhododendrons and azaleas in the landscape require little or no fertilizer. Having humus (decomposed organic matter) in the soil and maintaining organic mulch or compost around azaleas is more important than applying chemical fertilizers, and much safer. Decomposition of the mulch normally provides the nutrients needed for the good health of the shrubs.

If the leaves begin to yellow (with green veins) or plant growth seems stunted, a soil test or tissue analysis may be useful to determine if your plant may have nutritional deficiencies. Contact your WVU Extension county office for soil sampling instructions and test submission forms. Soil test results will show the specific amounts of phosphorus, potassium and various other important elements that are present in the soil. The results may be accompanied by specific fertilizer recommendations to correct any deficiencies. Your county WVU Extension agent may also be able to provide specific recommendations. Applying chemical fertilizers without first determining plant nutritional deficiencies may harm your azaleas and rhododendrons.

Pruning

Prune these shrubs after spring flowering; new flower buds will set by late summer. If severe pruning is not required, remove spent flower heads after flowering to prevent the formation of seeds. At this time you can also remove a few small branches to maintain plant shape and density. This helps to keep the plant healthy and enhances next year's bloom quality. If large, overgrown plants need rejuvenation, prune heavily when the plant is fully dormant. With this type of pruning, a season's blooms will be sacrificed.

Cultivating

Do not cultivate around rhododendrons or azaleas to loosen the soil or control weeds. The root system is very shallow and can be easily damaged.

References

Flora of West Virginia. Strausgaugh and Core. American Rhododendron Society.

For more information

Last updated May 2015

Compiled by Richard Zimmerman and Willem Van Eck. May 1989. Edited by John Jett.

For more information contact Mira Bulatovic-Danilovich, WVU Extension Service Specialist – Consumer Horticulture at Mira.Danilovich@mail.wvu.edu

www.ext.wvu.edu

Programs and activities offered by the West Virginia University Extension Service are available to all persons without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, veteran status, political beliefs, sexual orientation, national origin, and marital or family status. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Director, Cooperative Extension Service, West Virginia University.

The WVU Board of Governors is the governing body of WVU. The Higher Education Policy Commission in West Virginia is responsible for developing, establishing, and overseeing the implementation of a public policy agenda for the state's four-year colleges and universities.

AG15-110