

RHODODENDRONS AND AZALEAS

Rhododendrons and azaleas are long-lived plants providing that the site selection and soil preparation recreate the conditions that exist where they are found growing in the wild. Their basic needs are a humid atmosphere protected from drying winds and hot sun and an acid, largely organic, moist and well drained soil.

SITE REQUIREMENTS

Place in a part shade part sun location to encourage bud formation and compact growth. Shelter from prevailing winds which desiccate the foliage. Shade during the hottest part of the day in the summer. Shade in winter when the ground is frozen especially late February and March when the warming sun can scorch the leaves.

SITES TO AVOID

Do not plant too close to a reflecting wall or under an overhang. Avoid planting close to shallow rooted trees such as maples. Do not plant in windy areas where snow blows away leaving bare ground. Avoid very heavy, dark shade.

BEST CHOICE

Overhead dappled light for most of the day is ideal, or choose the north side of the house, fence or other plantings, where they will get good early morning light from the east, shade during the mid day and wind screening on the west and northwest. The best companion trees are pines and oaks which are deep rooted also like acidic soil.

SOIL

Acid soil is required, ideally 4.5 to 5.5 pH. Soil testing kits are available or a sample can be analyzed by a government or University laboratory.

TEXTURE

Soil should be loose and crumbly with a high percentage of humus. A minimum of 50% peat is recommended plus other organic material such as composted oak leaves, shredded pine bark, decaying wood chunks etc, literally, forest junk. This material helps to maintain acid conditions and the open texture allows air to penetrate to the root run after excess water has drained away.

MOISTURE

Soil must be consistently moist but never soggy. Adequate humus should hold moisture between rains but a deep watering will still be necessary, depending on conditions, approximately once a week. Never over water. Mulching over the roots with bark chips, cedar mulch or coco mulch helps to retain moisture and keep the soil cool.

SOIL DRAINAGE

Sharp drainage is critical. If existing garden soil is very heavy and/or poorly drained, keep the entire root system above grade by creating a raised mound or a planting bed using a retain wall such as logs, timbers or rocks. A layer of gravel or other coarse material is advised under the planting mixture.

AIR DRAINAGE

Rhododendrons and azaleas are best on slopes where cold air can drop away from the plants. Never plant them in a hollow and avoid flat areas where possible. Soil should slope away from the hot south sun so that the root system is kept as cool as possible. It is good to shade the root from the south with stones or other plant material.

PLANTING METHOD

Rhododendrons and azaleas have shallow root systems with many fine, hair-like roots held in a compact clump. It is important to be sure that the root tips are thoroughly in contact with the planting mix. Bed depth of 18" to 2' (50 cm to 60 cm) is adequate. Prepare a shallow hole, deeper and wider than the root. Return some of the well-worked soil to the hole with some extra peat, and water to create slush. Remove any container, burlap or plastic from the root and loosen the sides and bottom of the root ball slightly, in order to encourage the roots to penetrate into the surrounding soil. Set the plant so that the top of the ball will be at the surface of the ground, never lower. Back fill around the sides of the plant with prepared organic soil. Flood the plant in with a strong jet from the garden hose in order to blend the soil from the root with the new planting medium. Allow the water to drain and the plant to settle, and then adjust the level if necessary. Apply 3" (8 cm) of mulch over the entire root system.

AFTER CARE

Do not allow the plant to dry out, especially the first season, but do not over water. Hand weeding is advised. Add extra mulch in late fall. Extra winter protection such as evergreen boughs (Christmas trees) helps to collect snow and affords wind protection and shade. Remove thick mulch when the spring thaw comes to allow ground to thaw, but retain a layer throughout the year as the slowly decaying material feeds the plants. Rhododendrons and azaleas benefit from light applications of Rhododendron and Azalea Food in spring, or you may use 20-20-20 water-soluble fertilizers at a rate of 1 teaspoon per gallon of water, every three weeks during the active growing period. Do not give nitrogen after June 30th as this encourages late season growth, which will not mature before winter.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

If garden soil is very alkaline, apply sulphur at a rate of 1/2 cup to a 4' circle. This will acidify the soil water, which moves through the bed helping to retain the correct pH. Do not use aluminum sulfate as it is toxic to rhododendrons and azaleas.

HOW AND WHEN TO PRUNE

Rhododendrons seldom need pruning except to control their size and shape. Any required pruning should be done as soon as they have finished blooming. The plant grows vigorously at that time, and it is wise to keep this energy from going into unwanted growth. Simply cut the branches to the shape and size you want, making clean cuts with sharp tools. If a plant outgrows its site, it can be relocated. Because of their relatively shallow and fibrous root systems, rhododendrons are among the easiest of all plants to move.