



RHODODENDRONS

BUYING

To grow well in eastern Washington, rhododendrons need to be winter hardy to at least -20°F. Look for winter hardiness ratings on the plant label.

Purchase plants with healthy green foliage and no chlorosis (yellowing between veins of leaves). If plants are growing in a container (plastic pot), check to see that roots are not crowded or circling inside the pot. If you end up with a plant that has solid roots shaped like the container it was grown in, use a knife and make six or eight vertical cuts in the root ball. The cuts should go from top of root ball to the bottom. Make cuts an inch deep. Also cut an inch off the bottom of the rootball. This encourages the plant to make new roots and stimulates growth.

PLANTING SITE

North and east sides of building are best. These areas are protected from hot afternoon sun and cold winter winds. Do not plant in dense shade -- rhododendrons become spindly and bloom only sparsely. **Best** in moderate shade.

Do not plant under shallow rooted trees such as locust, maples, elms or most other trees and willows. Tree roots compete for water and food. Deep rooted trees that rhododendrons can grow beneath include pines, oaks (with the exception of the "Pin Oak", which is a surface feeder like the rhododendrons), Dogwood, Stewartia, Styrax Japonica, Japanese Maples, Crabapples, Katsura, Japanese Pagoda tree, Sour Wood and Redbud.

Rhododendrons need good air circulation, but resent being exposed to windy locations. Be aware that heat and light reflected from light colored homes and paved areas, can be drying and stressful to rhododendrons.

SOILS

Rhododendrons must be grown in a quick draining, well aerated, acid soil. (pH -4.5 -6.0.) The soil pH in the Inland Northwest generally falls between 6.5 and 7.2.

If your native soil is well drained, you can begin to meet these requirements by adding 4 to 5 inches of organic matter such as coarse peat moss (a natural acidifier), ground up decomposed leaves, well decomposed compost or sawdust or finely ground pine needles. This increases the water holding capacity. Peat moss increases soil acidity. Organic matter should make up 25% to 50% of the soil used for planting.

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To keep the soil acid, supplement with ferrous sulphate in early spring and again in September. Sprinkle over the surface of the soil, not touching the stems of the plant. Sulfur can also be used but is slower acting. Use a ½ cup of the supplement around a small plant, 1 cup around a medium sized plant and 1 ½ cups around a large plant. Use the supplements in addition, but not at the same time as special rhododendron fertilizers. Water in soon after applying.

One of the best methods of growing rhododendrons is in raised beds. This is especially true if the soil is heavy or there is hardpan a few inches below the surface of the soil level that would prevent adequate drainage. Beds should be a foot or more deep and nine times the size of each root ball. Mix new soil using 1/3 black soil or a soil mixture from a soil yard, and 1/3 peat moss, 1/3 ground up decomposed bark, compost or ground up pine needles,. You can use the existing soil, but mix in the 2/3 soil amendments.

PLANTING

Dig holes larger than root ball. Remove burlap or any other container.

Place the plant in the hole and wash away 1/3 of soil from root ball. Set the plant so that the roots begin to flare away from the trunk right at the soil surface.

Spread roots out toward walls of the hole. Fill the hole with water, let half of it drain out. Then fill with amended soil. Re-water (the mud brings the roots in contact with the soil, destroying air pockets).

Many rhododendrons are sold in a root ball of heavy clay. Don't allow this clay to dry out before planting. Be sure it stays moist until the plant is well established and sending out roots into the surrounding soil.

Never tamp or press soil down, this may injure the roots.

MULCHING

Mulch with two inches of pine needles or bark or 2-5 inches of leaves (oak are best). Do this after planting and add more before winter. Slope the mulch away from the stem to prevent rotting the bark or damage from mice and other rodents.

WEEDING

Hand pull weeds. **DO NOT** cultivate around shrubs. They have very shallow roots that can be injured. Use mulch to control weed growth.

WATERING

Rhododendrons must have adequate moisture, especially from the time the buds start to swell until new growth has reached maturity.

Keep soil moist, not soggy. Don't allow plants to set in water.

Be sure to water plants well in fall. Just before the first hard freeze soak rhododendrons well.

On warm winter days, spread mulch away from plant, water plant and replace mulch.

FERTILIZER

Use fertilizers formulated especially for rhododendrons (acid loving plants). Fertilize in a ring just outside the root ball (never on the root ball) and water in.

Feed when the buds start to swell and get sticky (spring) and again after the plant has flowered. Use fertilizers in the quantity recommended on the product label. Plant size determines amount.

Do not fertilize after July 1.

PINCHING

Rhododendrons tend to stretch towards the light with new single shoots emerging from last year's growth.

Pinching out single terminal growth buds just as they start spring growth will cause the plant to form multiple growth buds. This forms a more compact plant, but does not effect flowering the following year.



PRUNING

Prune just after blooming or when growth buds start to become active.

Remove dead, dying or diseased branches any time. Cut back flush with next main branch or trunk.

Established plants can be pruned severely. It will be a year before the plant has much foliage and two or more years before they flower.

"Deadheading" is removing a spent bloom after it has started to wilt. Snap off at the base above the lateral growth buds. This insures healthier plant and more blooms next year.

PESTS

Root Weevils feed as grubs on roots and on foliage and stems as adults. Grubs are white and stay in the soil, feeding on roots. Adults are black and climb up the stems to feed on leaves at night. Leaves look like someone has taken a pair of pinking shears to them. Spray foliage with Orthene in early evening. This may need to be repeated every 30 days beginning in late spring.

Aphids - use a registered insecticide or insecticidal soap or strong blast from the hose.

DISEASE

Root rot and Stem die back: Sudden wilting of one limb or the whole plant often during hot weather may be caused by Phytophthora and other fungi. These disease organisms are most active in poorly drained soil. The worst problem with these diseases is that even before symptoms appear it is often too late to save the plant. Prevention is the most important way of controlling these diseases. Provide excellent drainage and keep cool with mulch during hot weather.

Leaf spots: Reddish brownish black or purple spots: Leaf spots can be caused by fungi such as Botrytis, Phyllosticta, Septoria and others. Spraying with Benomyl or a similar fungicide can be useful. Other causes are wind burn, sunburn, drought and winter damage. Many problems go away with warmer, drier weather. A number of spots are physiological, generally purplish in color and don't harm the plant.

CHECK LIST

Yellow leaves usually indicate nutrient deficiency.

Fertilize and maintain soil acidity (page 2).

Is soil saturated with water? Lift and provide drainage or move to a better site.

Is soil heavy and packed so tight that air can't get into roots? Lift and work organic matter into the planting bed (not just the planting hole).

Was the rhododendron planted too deeply? Lift plant so that crown is not below the soil level.

Leaves appear burned or dried out with damage starting at the top and along the edges and progressing inward.

Roots have been damaged -- are not able to take up water.

During winter, moisture can't be translocated to foliage. Provide extra water during warm winter days if feasible.

Sunlight reflecting off the snow or light colored surfaces cause the leaf to transpire faster than it can bring up water to maintain a healthy leaf and it dehydrates. May need to move plant to more desirable location.

Quick weather changes from prolonged cool spells to extreme hot spells causes leaves to dehydrate.

Too high salt content results from applying more fertilizer than the plant can use. Give as much water as possible to wash fertilizer out of roots.

Curled and drooping leaves in very cold weather are normal. The leaves are protecting themselves from dehydration.

Winter injury

Dark blotches on leaves and along edges.

Deformed leaves.

Leaves turn brown, especially at the edges and near the tips.

Cracking of bark around the base or trunk (if all the way around trunk, plant will most likely die).

To prevent winter injury

Mulch after watering in late fall. Apply a thick layer of mulch but keep it away from the trunk.

Water in fall and on warm winter days.

Spray leaves with anti-desiccant in late fall. Temperature needs to be 40° or above. *Wilt Pruf* is one brand.

Move plants to a more favorable location.