

## RHODODENDRONS

Azaleas and rhododendrons are members of the plant family *Ericaceae* and the genus *Rhododendron*. The deciduous members of this family are known as “azaleas” while the evergreen members are referred to as “rhododendrons.”

### Buying:

The Eastern Washington gardener who wishes to grow rhododendrons will need to buy varieties that are cold hardy to at least -20 degrees Fahrenheit. Purchase plants with healthy green foliage, avoiding plants with chlorosis (yellowing between the veins of the leaves). If the plants are in a container, check to see that the roots are not crowded or circling. If you bring home a plant that turns out to have solid roots shaped like the container it was grown in, use a knife and make six or eight vertical cuts in the root ball at the time of planting. The cuts should go from the top to the bottom of the root ball and be an inch deep. Also, cut an inch off the bottom of the root ball.

### Site Selection:

Proper site selection is extremely important. Rhododendrons perform best in protected sites with partial shade. Some sun is needed; dense shade will result in spindly plants that will rarely bloom. Dappled sun in the summer, and little or no early morning sun in the winter is best. Early morning sun in the winter can heat the leaves and buds allowing water to transpire (evaporate) while the roots are in frozen soil and cannot supply water to the leaves. This will cause browning of the leaves and death of the flower buds. Avoid windy, exposed sites. The north or east sides of a building are the best locations for rhododendrons.

Do not plant under shallow rooted trees such as locust, maples, elms or willows. The tree roots will compete with the rhododendron for water and nutrients.

### Soil Preparation:

It is wise to have a soil test performed before preparing the soil. The test will give you an accurate reading of your soil's pH and organic matter. Test results may include recommendations to modify soil pH, organic matter content and fertility.

Soil at the site should be moist, but well drained, and aerated, with an abundance of organic material worked into it. These plants do not tolerate an alkaline soil, and prefer a pH of 4.5 - 5.5. The soil pH in eastern Washington generally falls between 6.5 - 7.2. You can acidify your soil by incorporating sphagnum peat moss, pine bark mulch, compost, and decomposed leaves into the soil.

Most soils in eastern Washington are highly mineral with low organic matter, but these plants grow in areas prefer soils rich in organic matter. For this reason, amending the soil may be necessary. Organic matter should make up 25% - 50% of the soil amendments. It is best to prepare the entire planting bed in this manner, rather than just amending the soil in the hole that you will be planting in.

### Planting:

Whether the plant is in a container or balled-and-burlapped, be sure to thoroughly moisten the root ball prior to planting. If the root ball is dry, water may run down the outside of it rather than infiltrating into it. Soaking the plant in a tub of water prior to planting will prevent a dry root ball.

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Dig a wide, shallow hole. The hole should be 3 - 4 times wider than the root ball, and the depth should be approximately 1 inch less than the root ball height. Remove burlap, twine, and any other container. It is important to plant the rhododendron so that the rootball is ½” to 1” above the soil line. Planting rhododendrons too deeply is a major cause of plant failure. Do not use your foot to tamp down the soil, do this gently with your hands. Water plants well after planting. Mulch with 2 - 5 inches of leaves (oak are best), pine needles, or bark. Keep mulch 2-4” away from the stems to prevent the bark from rotting.

**Weeding:**

Use mulch to help control weeds, and hand pull any that grow. Rhododendrons have very shallow roots. Cultivating with a hoe can easily damage their roots.

**Watering:**

Rhododendrons can be damaged by waterlogged soil, and yet, being shallow rooted, they can dry out quickly in the summer. At least 1” of water per week will be needed. The first sign of water deficiency is a slight twisting or curling of the leaves. When you see this, it is time to water. If you are not sure if your plant needs water, simply feel the soil with your fingers. If the top inch of soil feels dry, it is time to water. A good covering of mulch will conserve water and reduce the need to water as frequently during the summer months. Be sure to water the plants well in the fall. A thorough soaking just prior to the first hard freeze will help prepare your plants for the winter.

**Fertilizing:**

The fertilizer of choice is one that is specifically formulated for acid loving plants. Your local nursery can help you choose this type of fertilizer. Fertilize in a ring just outside (not on top of) the root ball. Fertilize in the spring when the buds start to swell and get sticky; fertilize again after flowering is complete. Be sure to follow the recommendations on the product label; more is not always better, and can damage or kill rhododendrons. Fertilizer recommendations are usually based on the size of the plant. Do not fertilize after July 1.

**Deadheading:**

Deadheading means removing the withered flower trusses. This improves appearance, and directs the plant’s energy to producing flower buds for next year’s blooming season.

**Pruning:**

Pruning rhododendrons and azaleas is often unnecessary in eastern Washington, except to remove dead, dying or diseased branches, which can be done at any time. If pruning for size reduction, the best time is just after blooming or when growth buds start to become active. Cut back to the next live branch or trunk that is at least ½ the diameter of the branch being removed.

**Rhododendron and Azalea Problems:**

Consult WSU publication EM091E [Identifying, Treating, and Avoiding Rhododendron and Azalea Problems](#) for more specific information on problems associated with these plants.