



## Growing Rhododendrons and Azaleas

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

Rhododendrons and azaleas are somewhat exacting in their cultivation requirements, and certain conditions must be met in order that the plants remain healthy and produce the desired growth. Some of these requirements are as follows:

1. SOIL - A good garden loam rich in organic matter; acid - pH 4.5 to 5.5. The soil must be well drained as rhododendron will not withstand a wet root zone.
2. 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.
3. PLANTING - Rhododendrons and azaleas should be planted shallow. That is, the earth ball should rest so the top of the ball is one to two inches above the soil line. If the planting pit has been properly prepared (as described in WVU Publication 467, "Planting Trees and Shrubs"), the plant should settle to the proper depth. A 2 to 3 inch layer of mulch should be applied to cover the earth ball. The best time for planting is early spring.
4. WATERING - Rhododendrons should be kept moist at all times but not wet. Proper mulching will help in maintaining favorable moisture levels.
5. FERTILIZING - Fertilize in the spring with a general purpose fertilizer such as 10-10-10 or 5-10-10. Special azalea and rhododendron fertilizers containing chelated iron are on the market. General recommendations call for approximately 1/2 cup of fertilizer per plant. Water well after fertilizing. Do not fertilize after July 1. Do not over-fertilize with a high nitrogen fertilizer as root damage may occur.
6. PRUNING - Prune after flowering; new flower buds are set by late summer. If severe pruning is not required, remove spent flower heads after flowering to prevent the formation of seed. This helps to keep the plant healthy and enhances next year's bloom quality.
7. CULTIVATING - Do not cultivate around rhododendrons or azaleas to loosen soil or control weeds. The root system is very shallow and can be easily damaged.

(Compiled by Richard Zimmerman and Willem van Eck. For further information, contact your County Extension Agent or call us at 293-4801 or 2219.)

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