

Planting and Care of Azaleas and Rhododendrons

Selecting planting site: Some rhododendrons and azaleas tolerate full sun, but most do best in shade from 11 am to 3 p.m. "High shade" (trees with branches up 20 feet or more) is ideal. However, do not plant under surface-rooted trees, such as beech, birch, cherry, and maple. Good drainage is important. Make a test hole with water that drains away in 3 hours. For foundation plantings, the north side is a good choice, followed by east, west, and finally south.

Preparing soil/planting: Dig a saucer-shaped hole with a diameter of twice that of the root ball of the plant and only deep enough to allow the top of the ball to be above ground level. Mix scooped-out soil with equal amounts of sphagnum peat moss and coarse sand or with an equal amount of sphagnum peat moss. Plastic wrap and string **must** be removed; burlap may be loosened. If a potted plant is root-bound, use a sharp knife to make vertical slits about 1/2 inch deep around the root ball and spread the clumped roots to allow new root growth. If the growing medium appears to be mostly pine bark, shake loose as much as possible and spread roots to allow maximum root contact with soil. After a plant is placed in the hole, put the scooped-out mix around the root ball and apply a 2-inch mulch of coarse organic material such as pine needles, oak leaves, pine bark, hardwood bark, tanbark, and aged wood chips (in this order of preference). Avoid materials that compact and prevent water absorption. Do **not** bury the plant stem.

Transplanting: The ideal time for transplanting is from September to December. Do not transplant when the ground is wet. Dig out as much root ball as possible and follow directions for planting as appropriate.

Watering: Watering newly planted plants is very critical, especially container-grown plants, since soilless mixes have very little water-holding capacity. Balled and burlapped plants should not be soaked more than once a week. Watering, and good drainage, are the most important factors in the first year. New growth on even established plants will wilt on hot spring days, but plants do not need water if the leaves are turgid the next morning. Water if the soil is dry or after about 10 days of no rain in hot weather. At least 1-2 inches of water must be laid down at one time, even more in a wooded area.

The ideal soil pH, a measure of acidity, with 7.0 being neutral, is about 5.5 for rhododendrons and azaleas. Lime is used to raise the pH and sulfur or iron sulfate, to lower it. Be cautious of composts, which may have a higher pH. A lot of sand or Perlite® may be used to improve drainage.

Mulching: Mulching with organic matter (fall is an excellent time) enriches the soil and keeps it moist and at a desirable temperature in the winter and cool in the summer. However, **overmulching** may slowly kill a plant; iron chlorosis (yellowing) on new leaves is a sign of overmulching and is not necessarily corrected by an application of chelated iron or fertilizer. Mulch should not be added until "old" mulch is almost decomposed and incorporated into the soil. Do not mulch for weed control--handweed!

Fertilizing: After the planting mixture is placed around the root ball, water thoroughly with a soluble starter fertilizer solution, one low in nitrogen and high in phosphorus. Mature, well-established plants need little if any supplemental fertilizer. In most cases, the breakdown of organic mulch will supply enough nutrients. Young plants may be fertilized with half-strength commercial soluble fertilizer such as Miracle Gro® or Up-Start®.

Pruning: Well-established plants need little pruning, except to reduce the height of a plant or to remove a leggy branch. Pruning is best done after blooming but can be done in late winter when plants are still dormant, if new growth is encouraged and blooms can be sacrificed. Azaleas may be pruned on the stem or branch, but rhododendrons must be cut 1/4 inch above a set of leaves (leaf node) to stimulate new growth. Old, over-grown plants can be cut back to 18 inches if need be. It is safest to do so over a 3-year period by cutting back in one year no more than 1/3 or 1/4 of the plant. Pruning stimulates root development and encourages **multiple** new stem growth from the point where the plant is cut.

Dead-heading: Removing the wilted trusses of large-leaf rhododendrons soon after blooming is beneficial for young plants, for energy is directed into vegetative growth rather than seed production. Cut or snap out the sticky seed-pod clusters above the new leaf buds, trying not to remove these buds.

Pests: Rhododendrons and azaleas are relatively free of insect pests and diseases if plants are kept healthy by following the above cultural conditions. Healthy, well-grown plants will tolerate a population of insects. The old adage "the more you spray, the more you have to spray" is true. Spraying causes resistant strains of insects and diseases to evolve.