

# Rhododendrons

## A Garden Guide

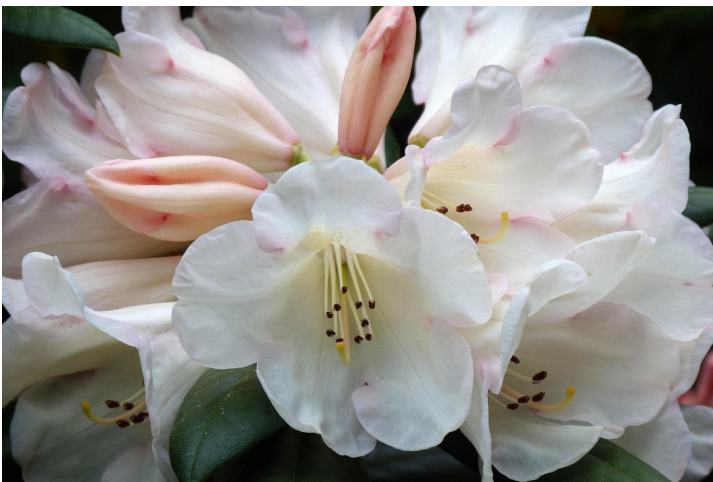
Rhododendrons are quintessential mountain shrubs, with gorgeous flower trusses and handsome foliage. Native to various parts of the world, including right here in Western NC.

Rhododendrons are in the Heath family, Ericaceae, and generally love very acidic, well-draining soil.

There are 1200 different species of Rhododendrons, including Azaleas, and over 28,000 hybrids and cultivars. While most Rhododendrons are evergreen, some are deciduous, notably many of the more wild type ones native to the US Southern Appalachian region. The ones we carry are selected by staff experts as ones that will do well in this area, that said, they do prefer fairly specific conditions and will be happiest if they are met. Rhododendrons can live for 100+ years.



**Siting:** Rhododendrons perform best with morning sunlight, and afternoon shade. Full sun can stress, burn, and discolor the plants. They benefit from protection, especially winter winds, and do well planted against houses and rock walls. Rhododendrons are often planted as an evergreen backdrop in beds, foundation plants at the base of a home, dense hedges and as specimens. They can also be grown in containers, and trained via bonsai and penjing, although keep in mind they will need more watering and will have less cold hardiness in winter. In the wild they can be found at stream and forest edges, and clinging to rocks in the cloud forests of the upper elevations.



any woody roots that might be visible.

**Soil and Planting:** Rhododendrons prefer a pH of 4.5-6.0, with moist, well-draining soil. Usually in our soils, they will need at least 1/3rd soil conditioner, up to 1/3rd rich composts, mixed with our native clay. Dig a hole 2-3x as wide as the pot, plant with 1/3rd of the root ball ABOVE the soil line. Another alternative is to plant them in raised beds. Apply 2-3" of mulch to the root zone, do not let it touch the trunk or

**Fertilizing:** Rhododendrons benefit from fertilizers designed for acid-loving plants. Happy Frog® Acid Loving Plants Fertilizer, Espoma Holly-tone®, and Symphony Organic Fertilizer are all good choices. Compost tea is a wonderful snack for your plants in the spring and summer. They can be fed organic low-to-no Nitrogen fertilizers in the fall.

**Watering:** Water newly planted shrubs immediately after planting, during their first year in the ground, and as needed throughout the growing season, especially during any periods of drought.



**Organic Treatments:** Like people, happy, non-stressed plants are far more disease and pest-resistant. Rhododendrons are best sited in partial shade with good drainage and winter protection. For pest issues that might arise, Horticultural Oil or Insecticidal Soap are good options. If fungal issues arise, prune to promote air circulation, remove diseased parts, and spray with Copper if necessary. For more information, see our Garden Guide 'Rhododendrons & Azaleas - Organic Pest & Disease Management'

One important pathogen to be aware of with our clay soils is Phytophthora (a type of water mold, the name translates to Plant Destroyer), which can mimic drought stress, with fresh new growth tips looking rather burnt and moving deeper into the plant with time. Poor drainage not only stresses Rhododendrons, it can leave them extremely vulnerable to Phytophthora as they live in water and will happily attack given the opportunity. Once an area of your garden has Phytophthora it is impossible to eradicate. The best method of dealing with them is to dig a proper hole with excellent drainage or plant in a raised bed, as mentioned above in **Soil and Planting**.

**Pruning:** Pruning is done on an as-needed basis, usually post-flowering. Note that this can be a very short window of time between the old blooms fading and next year's flower buds developing. Deadheading old blooms by cutting them at their base will help the plant spend more energy on developing next year's flower buds. Damaged or dead growth can be removed at any time.

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